

TINSEL &
TENTACLES

ALL I WANT
FOR CHRISTMAS IS

Tentacles

CHLOE ARGHER

*All I Want for Christmas is
Tentacles*

A WINTER HOLIDAY MM TENTACLE
ROMANCE

TINSEL AND TENTACLES

CHLOE ARCHER

Contents

[All I Want for Christmas is Tentacles](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Bonus Chapter](#)

[Author's Note](#)

[About the Author](#)

This is a work of fiction. References to real people, dead people, companies, restaurants, events, products, locations, and pop culture are intended to provide a sense of authenticity and are used fictitiously. Characters, names, story, plot, location, dialogue, and geeky humor all come from the author's imagination and should not be construed as real.

ALL I WANT FOR CHRISTMAS IS TENTACLES: A WINTER HOLIDAY MM
TENTACLE ROMANCE (Tinsel and Tentacles)

Copyright © 2023 by Chloe Archer

All rights reserved.

Cover design: Delaney Rain

Editing: KRS Author Services

Proofing: Lori Parks

Published by Rainbow Dreams Press LLC

Ebook ISBN: 978-1-959219-11-8

Paperback ISBN: 978-1-959219-12-5

No part of this work may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review. Please do not participate in or encourage piracy of copyrighted materials in violation of the author's rights.

NO AI/NO BOT. The copyright holder does not consent to any Artificial Intelligence (AI), generative AI, large language model, machine learning, chatbot, or other automated analysis, generative process, or replication program to reproduce, mimic, remix, summarize, or otherwise replicate any part of this creative work, via any means: print, graphic, sculpture, multimedia, audio, or other medium. The copyright holder supports the right of humans to control their artistic works.

www.chloearcher.com



All I Want for Christmas is Tentacles

Seasons greetings and alien abductions! Can two misfits find love together? It might just take a Christmas miracle! Let's hope Santa doesn't mind that tentacles can be both naughty and nice...

Khephren

There's no way in Helgar's Nebula I'm marrying the candidate my parents have chosen for me. I don't want to be the house-husband of some stoic warrior who only cares about training all day. Boring! Thankfully, I've learned a thing or two from all those rom-com human movies I've illegally downloaded off the intergalactic web. No one will see it coming when I pull a runaway groom maneuver on them!

Once I make my escape, I can go on the solo honeymoon of my dreams—to planet Earth. It's almost that wondrous time of year when they celebrate their holiday known as “Christmas.” Human Hallmark movies make it seem so magical. I want to experience it for myself! Now, I just need to find a human who can make my wish come true and help me have an authentic holly jolly time...

Sasha

Scrooge was right when he said “bah humbug” to Christmas. This time of year sucks balls, and not the fun kind. I've just lost my crappy part-time job and I'm slowly sinking under a sea of student loan debt and crushed dreams.

Just when I think my life couldn't possibly get any worse, my cat and I are abducted by an alien who wants me to help him

experience a “real human Christmas” on his ship. WTF? Clearly he’s chosen the *worst* possible candidate for the job.

But there’s something about Khephren’s enthusiasm and eternal optimism that starts to melt even my grumpy, cynical heart. Heck, I even agree to be his fake fiancé to get his parents off his back! I don’t know what’s happening to me, but Khephren’s charm is making me feel things I never have before. And those bright pink tentacles of his are strangely fascinating. I can’t help but wonder what all they can do...

As we spend more time together, I start to realize I might not want to go home and that maybe, just maybe, I’ve found what I’ve always been looking for. Could Khephren feel the same? If so, it would be a Christmas miracle and I don’t believe in those...right?

All I Want for Christmas is Tentacles is a standalone novel (74k words) in the *Tinsel and Tentacles* multi-author winter holiday MM tentacle romance series. It features a runaway tentacled-alien groom obsessed with Hallmark movies and Christmas, a grumpy human who’s down on his luck and says “bah, humbug” to the holidays, an alien abduction, fake fiancé fun, a cat named Jonesey, a droid named Rambo, a ship called the Sleigh Belle, found family, sweet and cozy vibes for the season, and a guaranteed HEA!

For content warnings, please visit the [Author’s Note](#)



Chapter One

Privately Relayed Intergalactic Communication and Knowledge System (PRICKS)

Stardate: 47634.44

DataMaster: Help! My parents want me to marry someone I don't love. What should I do?

EatMyCometDust: LOL. Just tell them NO. *shrugging emoji*

DataMaster: You don't understand! They're being quite forceful about this.

NebulaNerd: Is this marriage candidate hot? Do they have a solid retirement portfolio? A large tentacle to pleasure you with? Might be worth it.

DataMaster: He's good-looking, I suppose, but he's just not my type.

NebulaNerd: Sounds to me like you're waaaay too picky. Maybe your parents know best.

EatMyCometDust: Screw that! You should get to make your own choices, especially when it comes to marriage!

DrWhoDaFuck: What if you took a cue from Earthlings? They're so delightfully creative.

DataMaster: Ooh! Humans! I love their movies. *grinning tentacle emoji* I've been secretly downloading them off the intergalactic web for years.

DrWhoDaFuck: Then you've surely seen a romantic comedy or two, right?

DataMaster: Of course. They're some of my favorites! *heart eyes tentacle emoji*

EatMyCometDust: Heh. I think I know where this is going. Right on!

DataMaster: Uh, I'm still confused...

DrWhoDaFuck: Come on! Isn't it obvious? You totally need to embrace the runaway bride trope! Well, except that you'd be a runaway groom.

EatMyCometDust: Called it! Oh yeah, baby!

DrWhoDaFuck: *devil with horns emoji* Plan your escape and ditch that dude at the altar. If the movies are correct, you're sure to find your true love after that. Maybe Earthlings are on to something...?

NebulaNerd: Becoming a runaway groom sounds risky to me. What happens if you get hurt or caught? *frowny face emoji*

EatMyCometDust: @NebulaNerd if you're not gonna help @DataMaster escape his unwanted fate and find true love, SHUT IT!

DataMaster: Ohmyfreakinggalacticgods! You all are BRILLIANT. Human movies always know best. I'm totally going to be a runaway *groom*! *victory tentacle emoji*

KHEPHREN

Hiding inside my enormous hollowed out multitiered wedding cake is surprisingly both more exciting and more claustrophobic than I expected. My tentacles are wrapped around my body so tight I can barely breathe.

"Pssst! Is the coast clear?" I whisper. My left knee itches but I can't really move enough to scratch it.

Najar Mezdel stops pushing the cart carrying the enormous cake—and me. "What part of covert didn't you understand about this plan? Shut. The. Hell. Up."

My best friend is using his no-nonsense voice, which means he's one frosted rosette away from wanting to strangle me with his tentacles. I've learned to recognize the subtle

nuance all too well over the years, so I wisely decide to follow his orders.

For now.

It's positively maddening not being able to see anything from my hiding spot though. But needs must when one is trying to mastermind escaping from one's own impending nuptials.

Which I am—and quite brilliantly if I do say so myself.

Indeed, I took plenty of inspiration from human movies, including for this decoy cake, which is really a large cylinder hiding space concealed with a layer of frosting around its exterior—just like in my favorite musical, *Singin' in the Rain*.

When I hear a familiar determined tread of footsteps coming our way, I hold my breath and pray to whatever galactic gods might exist. *Please don't let anything stop me now, not when I'm so close to achieving my freedom!*

“Najar, have you seen my son? He stepped out to use the restroom and seems to have gotten himself lost.” My father's voice is full of exasperated humor and I cringe. He is *not* going to be happy when he discovers I've bailed on this wedding he and Mom arranged.

To be fair, I did tell them dozens of times that I didn't want to get married—especially to the guy they picked out—so it kind of serves them right.

“No, I haven't seen him since earlier this morning. I can help you search once I get things taken care of with the cake. The baker forgot a last-minute embellishment, so I'm taking it to the kitchens for them to put on the finishing touches.”

There's a short pause and my hearts stutter.

“How odd,” my father murmurs.

Najar gives a hearty chuckle. “You know how temperamental artists can be.”

Good thinking, Najar! My best friend is always cool under pressure.

My father guffaws. “Too true. Hurry up about it and then please come help me. The ceremony starts in twenty minutes.”

“Of course, Lord Thrase.”

Father’s footsteps stride off purposefully and Najar speeds up his wheeling of the cart. I grip the slim pole in the center of my hiding nook and cling on for dear life, praying to the universe that I don’t go careening through the flimsy false side of the cake.

“I never should have let you talk me into this disastrous plan,” Najar mutters under his breath.

Deep down, I do feel a smidge guilty about begging for his help, but my runaway-groom plan doesn’t work without Najar. I didn’t have a lot of other options either because there is no way in Helgar’s Nebula I am going through with this wedding!

Colonel Borlan Kuretti is not a man I want to marry. I’m sure he’s perfectly nice for someone else, but not for me. And I’m most certainly not for him! He wants a good little househusband who will keep his home in order and look nice on his arm at formal events.

That has never been, nor will it ever be, me.

My parents know my dream has always been to leave this planet and travel the universe. But as an unmarried Dravethian born without a warrior’s mark, I am not allowed to travel off-planet alone. If I had a warrior spouse to protect me, it would be fine in the eyes of my people, but there aren’t many men in that class who wish to travel the universe. They’re trained to defend our world, and most feel a strong compulsion to stay and protect it.

After nearly ten years of searching for a compatible mate on my own without any luck, my parents decided to step in.

They mean well. I know that. In the eyes of Dravethian society, I’m deemed valuable for my computer programming skills but without a warrior’s mark I’m not considered able to protect myself since I wasn’t born and trained to fight. It’s all foolish archaic nonsense if you ask me, but Dravethian culture has long revered our warrior class and treated the rest of us

like we're helpless! In my experience, brains are far more effective than brawn. But apparently, my opinions don't matter.

Many of my peers have already given in to the inevitability of marrying a warrior to gain more freedom in our society, and some seem perfectly happy with their choice, which is great for them. However, I've decided I'm not going down without a fight!

I refuse to let go of my dreams.

Besides, I've watched enough of the human Hallmark Christmas movies to know that true love is real! And I'm determined to find it in a small town somewhere in the vastness of the universe with a handsome guy who wears flannel, knits hats for the underprivileged, and runs his own alpaca farm, because it's quite clear to me I'm not meant to find it on Draveth.

A sudden jolt knocks me out of my musings.

"Time to get out," Najar whispers urgently as the cart comes to a sudden stop.

He presses a hidden button, and a secret panel opens just wide enough for me to squeeze out of the cake, with far less flair to my entrance than Debbie Reynolds' in *Singin' in the Rain*, and step onto the floor of the teleporter bay. Sweet, beautiful freedom and fresh air! I immediately use my lowest left tentacle to scratch my knee. *Ahh, so much better.*

Part One of My Brilliant Plan to Escape Matrimonial Tyranny is complete!

"We only have a few minutes. The teleporter technician is on a break, and I managed to bribe the security guard to go to the bathroom, but this has to be fast. Work your magic, Kheph."

Najar doesn't need to tell me twice! I race over to the teleporter station.

The setup is simple. Child's play, really. My tentacles whip forward, glad to be free of the cramped space inside the cake, and begin typing as I break into the system with quick

efficiency. I may not be a warrior but I'm a master computer programmer and one hell of a hacker.

Believe me, I'm not about to announce that little secret far and wide!

Najar stands at the door, peering out the small window while I work. All too soon, his back stiffens. "Blackholes and bollocks! They're on to us. It's now or never, Kheph."

I set the timer to initiate. "Now!"

We race over to the platform and take our positions in the necessary spots.

Just as the teleporter fires up, the beams of light surrounding us both, I spy my enraged fiancé in his full military regalia burst through the door. His face twists with rage and I give him a cheerful grin and a saucy tentacle salute. Then I feel the familiar sucking sensation as Najar and I are teleported to the secret location where I've been hiding my ship. I covertly bought it a few years ago and have been refurbishing it during every free moment I have. She's been ready for a few months, but now my baby gets to take her rightful place among the stars!

We land on the ground with wobbly legs, and have to use our tentacles to steady ourselves. Teleporting isn't easy on the body, but I'm willing to endure some discomfort to achieve my freedom. Racing for my ship, I tap in the external keypad code to let down the ramp. Once inside, we head to the helm.

My vessel is of moderate size, and can comfortably house about ten crew members. For now, however, it's just me and Naj—

"You didn't think you were going to ditch this two-bit planet without me, did ya?"

Whirling around, I find my other bestie, Luna Bazran, hand cocked on her hip, and her pint-sized assistant droid, Rambo, at her side as usual.

I still lament the day I downloaded that one Earth film without knowing anything about it. For the most part, I don't like scary or violent films. But when it comes to injustice,

Luna has a blood-thirsty streak that's larger than the Rebulon Nebula, so of course she became obsessed with *Rambo*—and Mr. Sylvester Stallone.

Hopping into my command seat, I begin to set our navigation route and activate the cloaking shield. “Luna, I don't want you making any rash decisions. We likely won't be coming back. Or at least not for a long time.”

Although I do hope my parents will mellow eventually, I don't intend to return. I can't be who I want to be here. My future is somewhere out among the stars. I feel it in every one of my tentacles!

Luna gives a loud huff. “You may be a brilliant programmer, Kheph, but you need an actual engineer on this ship to keep her engine purring and her systems running.”

Neptune's nads!

Luna's not wrong but I really don't want to drag any more friends into my mess.

I look up from the control panel, my tentacles writhing with agitation. “You know how much I appreciate all the work you've helped me do on this ship, but I don't want you to get sucked into my drama. The cost is too high.”

Najar's different. His parents died in battle when he was quite young and he has no living family that he knows of. My parents paid for his warrior training and then hired him to be my bodyguard when we came of age until I married. If I had stayed on Draveth and wed Colonel Kuretti, he would have lost his position, and he has no interest in joining the military and becoming phaser fodder. To say we both don't fit into Dravethian society is an understatement.

Luna scoffs and crosses her arms. “Come on, Kheph. When haven't I been sucked into your drama?”

Okay, that's fair. She's my runner-up BFF. Najar will always have first place because we've known each other since we were in diapers. Luna didn't come along until primary school, but the three of us have been practically inseparable ever since.

“Besides, I’m in the same boat as you,” Luna continues. “It’s only a matter of time before my folks want to set me up with some warrior who expects me to be their lame wifey-poo. Fuck that noise. I’d much rather go on adventures in outer space with you and Naj.”

Rambo raises his tiny titanium robotic arms in the air and beeps. “To infinity and beyond!”

“Exactly,” Luna agrees.

Najar groans. “Galactic gods, I told you to stop sharing human movies with her. Now she’s programmed her damn droid to talk in nothing but movie lines!”

Luna scowls at him and pets Rambo on his shiny chrome head. “Don’t listen to that grumpy asshat. You’re brilliant.”

Rambo emits a series of happy beeping noises before saying, “I like to use both sides of my brain.”

“You don’t have a brain,” Najar mutters as he completes his systems check.

“Check yourself before you wreck yourself,” Rambo offers.

I sigh and study Luna. “Are you really willing to leave everything behind to explore the unknown with Naj and me?”

Luna grins and tosses one of her pigtails—the same green as her undulating tentacles—behind her before pointing her foot at an enormous bag stowed in the corner. It’s packed so full it looks about ready to burst open at the seams. “All packed and ready, captain.”

Damn. I am one lucky Dravethian to have such steadfast, amazing friends.

My answering grin is huge. “How long have you been planning this?”

“Long enough. Why do you think I spent so much time designing the chamber on the ship that I’m claiming dibs on?” She rolls her eyes at me like I’m a dumbass. “I knew we’d get off this rock and away from the marriage-minded meddlers in

our lives one day. You're not the only one with grand ambitions, Kheph."

Najar clears his throat and gives a grumpy grunt. "I hate to interrupt this touching moment, but we need to get a move on. Our window of opportunity is limited, and we want to be far away before Kheph's parents and his pissed-off fiancé send a squadron after us."

That dose of reality gets us moving. We take our positions and have the ship's engine fired up and our navigation set in no time at all. In moments we're hurtling through the atmosphere and beyond.

"No sign of pursuit," Najar states matter-of-factly, his tentacles flying over the control panel at his station and his eyes surveying the screens with laser focus.

He's the sarcastic but more serious one in our trio and we love him to pieces. He knows how to rein in Luna and me when we get too carried away. Najar is the most loyal being I know, and he's the kind of guy you want in your corner 'when the shit hits the fan' as the humans say.

I beam at him. "That's because Luna and I designed a foolproof cloaking shield for this ship."

"You bet your ass we did," she singsongs.

Rambo lets out a series of beeps and says, "Hail to the king, baby."

Luna chortles. "You know it!"

Najar flicks a suspicious glance at me. "I thought for sure your fiancé and his men would have figured out the coordinates of the location you beamed us to."

I avert my gaze, but a few of my traitorous tentacles coil in guilt and give me away.

Najar's eyebrows snap together sternly. "Kheph? What did you do?"

I pretend to be focused on my own screen even though the navigation route is already on autopilot and there's little more for me to do at the moment.

Luna snickers. “That’s his guilty tentacle pose.”

I scowl at her. “Is not.”

“Is too.”

“It is so not!”

Najar’s mouth quirks and then he throws his head back and laughs, the sound filling me with familiar warmth. “It totally is. Don’t forget we’ve known you since childhood.”

I cross my arms and my tentacles wrap around my shoulders. “Fine. I may have ensured the system scrambled our coordinates after we teleported.” I pause. “And might have sent them to the Vamorox Desert.”

There is a long pause as my friends stare at me in open-mouthed shock. Then, Luna starts to cackle with glee and gives me a high tentacle, slapping mine hard enough to sting. “Nice work, Kheph! That stupid buttmunch had it coming. He didn’t care about you. He was only interested in your family’s money. He deserves to wander around that awful place until he gets eaten by a *jabbergack*.”

While I wouldn’t go quite that far, sadly, I know she’s right about the money. Worse yet, even my parents knew it. But they were just thrilled to find a warrior willing to marry a weirdo like me that they were happy to ignore his far from romantic motivations.

“I’m sure they’ll be fine. Their communicator signals will work out there. It means they’ll just have to wait a while for rescue. By the time anyone figures out what we’ve actually done, we’ll be light years away.”

Luna eyes me thoughtfully. “Are you going to contact your parents? Once we’re out of range, I mean.”

I wince. “Probably? Just not right away.” I shake my head. “I do love them. They’re good people. They’re just mired in tradition and have trouble broadening their worldview, let alone their galaxyview.”

Luna’s eyes grow sad. “My folks are much the same.”

I sigh. “My parents don’t get my yearning to travel the universe to see other worlds and meet other species. For them, a vacation to another world every now and again is enough. But I’ve always wanted so much more.” I flush. “And my passion project is one I know they’d think was frivolous.”

Luna nods, her eyes knowing and sympathetic. “Same. I left a message for my parents that will be delivered to them in a few hours. They’re not going to be happy about what I’ve done, but they’ve got my obedient older brother and sister who followed the traditional path. They can’t be too upset if their youngest child decides to fully embrace being the family’s social misfit.” She shrugs. “If you’d decided to marry that fool, I probably would have stolen the ship right out from under you and headed off on my own.”

I snort. “Now that I can believe.”

In all honesty, I should have known that Luna would have caught wind of my plan and want in on it. Not just because she loves and supports me in all things, but because we’re kindred spirits on many levels. She’s like the sister Najar and I never had. She and I are on the same energetic wavelength most of the time, and Najar keeps us from careening out of control. It’s kind of a shame that none of us have ever had any romantic feelings for each other. Things might have been a lot easier if Najar had wanted to marry me or Luna. But few things are simple in this life.

I’m secretly glad that Luna decided I was being an idiot and invited herself along on this adventure. Najar and I would have been lost without her if I’m honest. Plus, she probably would have hunted us down and cheerfully cut off a tentacle each for leaving her behind.

It would grow back. But it would hurt like a sonofabitch.

The moment we break through the final layer of atmosphere I stare around me with awe. I’ve been on several ships for short missions before, even a couple of longer vacations with my family, but the lure of the universe has never lost its magical appeal. To finally be the captain of my own ship, and ergo, my own destiny, is a heady rush. For the

first time in my life, I'm totally free. I can go wherever I want in this universe. Just thinking of the possibilities makes me giddy.

I wave my excited tentacles at my friends. "We're entering light speed momentarily, so get ready."

Luna cocks her head, a grin spreading across her face. "Where are we going?"

Even Najar arches an eyebrow and one tentacle at me, no doubt wondering the same thing.

I try not to bounce in my command seat. "We're taking the honeymoon trip I've always dreamed of. Trust me, this adventure is all about bucket lists—for all of us! As captain, I am claiming the privilege of pursuing one of my items first."

Luna's eyes widen. "Your really big one? The one we've talked about for years?"

I nod in time with my eager tentacles. "Indeed. We're on a direct course for Earth!"

Najar frowns. "We don't have clearance to land on Earth. There's no way the Alliance will let us do so."

I can't hold back a pout. "I know. It's quite unfortunate that our physical appearance would be too upsetting to the majority of Earth's population, at least according to the Alliance. However, based on my calculations, it is nearing that time of year when the humans celebrate the most magical of all Earth holidays."

Najar groans long and loud. "I should have known better. Kheph, you can't be serious about this."

Luna does a little dance in her seat. "Right on! This is going to be awesome."

My tentacles are vibrating. "Yes, my bestest of besties. It's almost that special season in which humans celebrate the holiday known as Christmas."

Rambo beeps a few times and says, "The Dude abides."

“Kill me now,” Najar mutters. “Your mutual love of this foolish human holiday is ridiculous.”

Luna ignores him and sighs dreamily. “It’s so romantic. The Hallmark movies always make it seem so festive and special. And true love is always in the air.”

My tentacles wriggle enthusiastically. “Exactly! I have become so enamored of this holiday that I wish to experience it for myself. The *real deal*, as Earthlings say.”

Najar crosses his arms and a couple of his tentacles and scowls at me. “There is no way we’re going to be able to celebrate this holiday incognito on Earth. The Alliance will have us deported in a heartbeat.”

I waggle a tentacle at him in admonishment. “No, no, no, my dear friend. We’re going to celebrate Christmas on our ship.”

He looks confused. “Why do we need to go to Earth for that?”

“Because I want to create an *authentic* Christmas experience, and to do that I need the guidance and knowledge of a human.”

Najar frowns. “I already told you—”

“So we’re going to invite one on an intergalactic Christmas adventure aboard our ship!”

He freezes. For the first time in a long time, I’ve rendered Najar speechless.

I’m rather proud of that.

Luna’s eyes sparkle. “Who is this awesome fucking rebel and what did he do with my formerly rule-abiding friend?”

I beam at her. “I’m just embracing my true self at last.”

Najar finally recovers. “Adventure isn’t the word I’d use for what you’re planning. It’s another ‘A’ word entirely.”

“But it *will* be an adventure,” I protest.

Rambo does a little pirouette of sorts. “You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means.”

“This is a very bad idea,” Najar moans, his tentacles coiling and uncoiling with obvious displeasure.

“Not at all,” I tell him confidently. “We give one lucky Earthling the experience of a lifetime on an actual alien ship and, in return, they teach us the true ways of Christmas. Besides, we’ll give the Earthling some very nice gifts to take home at the end of their stay with us. It is a requirement of the holiday after all.”

Luna gives me a high tentacle again. “This plan sounds epic and I’m totally on board—pun intended. Let’s do it.”

I smack my tentacle against hers and fire up the light speed ignition. “Heck yeah.”

“Ah, buckle this! Ludicrous speed! Go!” Rambo says as we jolt forward on a direct course for planet Earth.

Christmas, here I come!



Chapter Two

Welcome to the magical world of Santa's Winter Wonderland! If you're reading this, then you're one of the lucky few chosen to serve as Santa's little helpers. No doubt you love this time of year just as much as we do. However, it is essential to note that working at Santa's Winter Wonderland isn't simply fun and games. No, believe us when we say, you won't be some "elf on a shelf," you'll be working hard for Santa and all the adorable children who come to visit him during this jolliest of seasons! We know you will take your duty and responsibility as Santa's elf very seriously. Remember to follow all of the policies and procedures outlined in this handbook. Bring on the Christmas cheer and be sure to whistle while you work!

—Employee Handbook for Santa's Winter Wonderland

SASHA

“I'm afraid I have to let you go, Mr. Vasiliev.”

Mr. Cornelius McGee, Head Elf of Santa's Winter Wonderland and my part-time boss, regards me with a look full of middle-management disappointment.

Fuck. I didn't want to do this gig in the first place, but I need the money to make ends meet this season.

I force a smile but suspect it's more of a grimace. “Now, now, Mr. McGee. Let's not be rash. I know I haven't been displaying my full Christmas spirit lately, but I'll do better from now on. I swear.”

I'll paint a happy smile on my face if I fucking have to.

Mr. McGee shakes his head, making his prosthetic elf ears flap and the bell on the end of his green hat-tail jingle. “I didn’t want to believe it, but I’m afraid you’re just not cut out for Santa’s Winter Wonderland. Even though you’re naturally gifted with an elfin physique, you don’t possess the necessary spirit of a Christmas elf.” He sighs. “Quite frankly, you lack the effervescent *joie de vivre* and festive *mindset* this position requires.”

Whatever the fuck that means.

My irritation mounts and I gesture at myself. “Look at me! I’m wearing the same damn elf costume you are.” I hate the tacky thing; and the stupid tights are uncomfortable and itchy as fuck. “I’m polite to the customers, I do the tasks I’m assigned.” And for barely more than minimum wage at that. “What more do you want from me?”

He steepled his hands on his desk, eyes filled with pity as they meet mine. “Mr. Vasiliev, here at Santa’s Winter Wonderland, we provide our customers with an experience. One they’ll never forget, and more importantly, one they will want to repeat. We warm their hearts and ignite the Christmas spirit in their souls. Being Santa’s elf is a *calling*.”

It takes everything inside *not* to roll my eyes. Apparently, all of that only costs \$24.99 per person, not including the additional cost for commemorative photos and other kitschy crap. This place is more of a capitalist hellscape that’s falsely advertised as a winter wonderland.

In Los Angeles, of all places.

Oh, the irony.

I cross my arms, no longer bothering to hide the grouchy core of my cynical soul. “What makes you think I’m not doing that?”

He glances at the clipboard on his desk. “Did you or did you not tell a paying customer to control his ‘unruly children’ or you’d ‘put an elfin curse on them’?” I grit my teeth at his obnoxious air quotes.

Well, fuckity fuck, fuck, fuck. “Okay, so I did say that. But those kids were feral little psychos, and their dumbass father was more interested in sexting with someone on his phone than keeping them from turning full-on *Lord of the Flies* while waiting for their turn with Santa.” From what I saw on his open Grindr app, I sure as hell don’t think it was his wife he was sending dick pics to either.

Mr. McGee arches an eyebrow and glances back at the clipboard again. Double dammit.

“When you were on your break, did you tell a precious child to ‘piss off’?”

I shift in my seat. “He kicked me and tried to steal my hat. Besides, I was on break. I wasn’t on the clock when that happened, so I don’t think that one can be counted against me, legally speaking.”

My soon-to-be-ex boss shakes his head and heaves another forlorn sigh. “Mr. Vasiliev, your poor attitude and lack of true Christmas spirit bring down the jolly atmosphere of Santa’s Winter Wonderland. We can’t have someone upsetting the parents or frightening the children. I’m afraid the company has seen fit to terminate your employment here, effective immediately.”

I grit my teeth before opening my mouth to say something else—what, I’m not quite sure—but then he shoves an envelope at me. “Your last paycheck.”

When I look at it, the fight goes out of me. Cornelius McGee may be an annoying and far too enthusiastic employee of Santa’s Winter Wonderland, but he’s right. There’s no way I can fake some bullshit “Christmas spirit” to hang on to this job. These days I’m more of a grinch than a jolly elf. This gig was doomed from the start.

In all fairness, I used to like the holiday season a long time ago. When I was a kid, Christmas was my favorite time of year. Now it just brings back bad memories.

I yank the envelope out of my now former boss’s hand and gesture at my outfit. “I assume I don’t get reimbursed for this

lame costume either?" I'd paid nearly a hundred bucks for it and had only worn it for two weeks.

Mr. McGee's general air of disappointment turns to outright indignation. "You're lucky to have had the rare opportunity to wear this magnificent costume. Cherish the memories, young man."

"Whatever." I get up and head for his office door. I don't want to spend another minute here if I'm not getting paid.

"Best of luck to you—and Merry Christmas!" Cornelius McGee calls after me, his chipper demeanor back in place.

"Bah, humbug!" I say as I slam his door behind me. Tightening the straps of my heavy backpack, I make a beeline for the exit and the promise of escape.

Heh. I could totally pitch *Escape from Santa's Winter Wonderland* to John Carpenter.

Once I'm outside, I sigh. I'm not sorry to lose the job, but the rejection stings more than I thought it would.

Evening in Los Angeles in early December is cool but temperate. I make my way to the closest bus stop and wait. Thankfully, I'm alone. The scowl on my face at the moment probably would have scared anyone else away anyway.

Opening the envelope and pulling out my check, I stare at the measly \$335.80. Pathetic as it is, I do need the money and it still isn't going to be even a fraction of what I need to pay my bills this month. I took that part-time job out of sheer desperation.

The starving artist—or rather, filmmaker—lifestyle fucking sucks.

When my bus arrives, I hop on. Even though I'm still in my ridiculous work outfit, no one even looks at me on the half-empty bus. I manage to find a seat that looks dry and reasonably clean, which is a rarity in its own right. Sitting, I clutch my bag to me. It contains my most prized possessions: my Panasonic HC-X1 video camera and my laptop. Call me paranoid, but my apartment building isn't in the greatest neighborhood, and we've had a number of break-ins lately.

Perhaps it's foolish, but I just feel safer having them with me at all times.

I pull the cord for the upcoming stop and make my way to the front of the bus. The tired driver doesn't even glance my way as I exit the doors, leaving me standing alone on the sidewalk and choking on a lungful of exhaust. Scowl firmly in place, I stride the four blocks to Furry Friends Play Palace.

And no, it's not *that* kind of establishment.

In fact, it's the name my sort-of-friend Shante came up with for an off-the-books side business she runs out of her house.

When I ring the doorbell of the small ranch-style bungalow, I'm greeted by the sounds of barking dogs and Shante's voice in the background. She opens the door, blinks at me in surprise and then starts laughing her fool head off.

"What the hell are you wearing?" she asks.

I amp my scowl up to eleven. "It's my work outfit. I didn't have time to change." My shoulders slump. "My former work outfit. I got fired."

Her expression immediately softens and she tosses her thick braids behind her back before gesturing me inside. "Sorry, babe."

I shrug as I follow her in. "Whatever. I hated Santa's Winter Fucking Wonderland anyway."

The rejection still fucking hurts though. Feels like the goddamn story of my life.

She arches her eyebrow. "I know that tone of voice, so I won't push for details. Let me get your baby girl for you."

While she disappears deeper into the house, I pull out my phone and quickly do a mobile deposit of that last paycheck. I sigh in relief when it goes through. At least I know I can afford to pay Shante.

Would some say it's foolish that I take my cat to a pet daycare while I work? Sure. But like I said, my apartment isn't exactly what I'd call super safe, and I've been freaked out

about what could happen to my fur baby while I'm away. An old film school acquaintance introduced me to Shante, who assured me she could take care of my girl for a reasonable price. She's been a lot more affordable than the other options I investigated, and she does treat all the animals she watches well.

It takes longer than I expect, but Shante eventually returns with my beautiful girl. Jonesy starts purring the moment she's in my arms again. I scratch behind her left ear where she likes it best as I put on her harness and leash.

"How much do I owe you for a half-day?" I ask.

Shante is biting her lip and darting nervous glances between me and Jonesy.

Oh, sweet Jesus. What now?

"What?"

She shuffles from foot to foot. "Uh, so you know how I told you I thought Jonesy was in heat?"

I grimace. "Yeah. The places I called told me I'd have to wait until it passes before I can get her spayed."

Shante winces. "Well, it seems that Ms. Jonesy has been finding a way to get out of the house when she's here. I was keeping her in a special room because of her condition, but she's somehow figured out the door handle's a bit janky and she's been sneaking out of the room and hightailing it out the doggy door that leads into the backyard."

I groan. My girl is too freaking smart sometimes.

About nine months ago, I found poor Jonesy abandoned on the street and she followed me home one night. The vet wasn't sure of her age at the time, but she warned me that I needed to get Jonesy spayed. I just couldn't afford it then and I've kept putting it off.

Shante sighs. "I'm happy to keep watching her, but I wanted to make sure you understood what was going on. There are quite a few feral cats in this neighborhood, if you

catch my drift, and I can't stop her from getting out unless you want me to keep her in a kennel.”

Fuck.

I rub my face, suddenly tired beyond all reason. “No, I'll figure something out. Now that I'm unemployed again, I'll need to take a break from bringing her over here until I find something else anyway. Sorry about that.”

Shante waves a pink-nailed hand at me. “Not a problem. You just text me when you want to have me start watching her again.”

I let out a slow breath of relief and then glance down at a purring Jonesy in my arms. “What am I going to do with you, baby girl?”

Shante takes a folded piece of paper out of her pocket and hands it to me. “Given Jonesy's situation, I did some research. These are a few non-profit organizations in the city that do spaying and neutering. You might qualify for their low-income options.”

I take the list gratefully. “I appreciate it. Thank you.”

After I settle up my bill—thank fuck I deposited that last paycheck—Shante hands over Jonesy's daily bag containing some of her food and treats, as well as a couple of her favorite toys.

Demonstrating some Tetris-level maneuvering, I manage to get everything in my backpack and head out with a happily strutting Jonesy.

Fuck yes, I walk my cat. Don't judge. She loves it and is actually very well-behaved on the leash. Given her gold eyes and blue-gray short hair, my vet says Jonesy's at least part Chartreux. Not the most affectionate breed of cat compared to some, and rather rare these days, but she and I get on well. We're both independent, grumpy bastards, which suits us just fine, thank you very much.

All too soon, my shoulders ache from the weight of my ready-to-burst backpack and my stomach roars like an angry Wookiee. I've had to skip lunch the last few days because my

credit card is maxed out and my bank account is dangerously low after paying this month's rent.

We pass a side street with several food trucks, and I take a brief detour, spending the last of my cash to buy a burrito almost as big as my head. I wolf down half of it and sigh with relief when my belly feels happier, and my hangry vibe dissipates. I savor the second half more slowly as Jonesy and I head toward home.

The sun has only just set when I decide to take a shortcut the rest of the way through a small park. Usually, I don't do this after dark because sometimes it's super sketchy at nighttime, but the park's devoid of people at the moment.

Honestly, I just need a little bit of time to myself to process the current fucking disaster that is my life. The park is far more serene than the busy street and gives me some much-needed peace and solitude, although the noise of a city as big as LA never disappears entirely.

As much as I hated that part-time gig at Santa's Winter Wonderland, I wasn't exaggerating about actually needing the paycheck it brought in. Being a destitute filmmaker with minimal job prospects is not quite how eighteen-year-old me envisioned my life turning out when I came here to study film at USC.

Like most cinephiles, I had grandiose ambitions of being a huge figure in the industry by the time I was twenty-five. Hell, I was convinced I'd direct a cinematic masterpiece by that age, just like Orson Welles did with *Citizen Kane*.

The reality, however, proved far different.

Breaking into the industry as an unknown, and without any connections or money, is so much harder than I imagined. These days it feels like the only new blood in town are nepo babies.

In the five years since I graduated, I've barely had any traction apart from a few short-term stints as an underpaid production assistant, which often involved doing the grunt work no one else wanted to do and getting coffee for

narcissistic jerks. Sort of shattered some of my dreams right then and there. But even those gopher jobs dried up during the pandemic, and I've basically had to do some less than exciting editing jobs for wedding videos and shit ever since. Lately, even that work has dried up as people pinch more and more pennies in our current economy.

Now that I'm twenty-six, being a famous filmmaker feels like a dream forever out of reach. Despite my best efforts, I don't have a whole lot on my resume to show that I've even dipped my pinky toe into the industry.

Don't get me wrong. I loved every minute of film school and don't regret it, but I only had a partial scholarship, and USC is expensive. Substantial student loans are lurking in the background, lumbering toward me like slow-moving but relentless zombies ready to devour me when the pandemic relief ends. I have nightmares where I'm swallowed under by the sea of debt I've managed to accumulate in my short time on this earth.

So sue me, Cornelius McFuckface, for not being motherfucking jolly enough!

The one area I've had some mild success is with my Instagram account, @ScreamQueenKitty. It's dedicated to recreating shots of famous scenes in iconic horror movies but replacing the main actor with Jonesy in costume. Is it seriously nerdy? Yes. But I've amassed a decent following, and it lets me play with the art form I love so much in my spare time.

I pitch my burrito wrapper in a trash can as Jonesy and I follow the sidewalk through the dimly lit park. Even though everything seems fine, I scan my surroundings the whole time. One never knows who one might encounter in LA in the middle of the night. However, it's still early, only dinnertime for most people.

Nevertheless, I move at a brisk pace while Jonesy keeps up easily with her loose-legged stride.

The stupid bell on the end of my elf hat jingles, making my mind replay the events from earlier. As irritated as I am with Cornelius McGee, who is *way* too enthusiastic about

pretending to be Santa's elf, I suppose I can't entirely fault him for letting me go. I always knew there was no way I was going to be able to fake Christmas cheer for very long.

But I tried. Honest, I did.

Ironically, when I was younger, this was my favorite time of year. Christmas was always a big deal in my family. My parents were hardcore into decorating the house, and my mother and grandmother would spend hours cooking and baking a veritable feast that was a mix of traditional Russian dishes passed down in the family and American ones we all loved. We'd always have roast pork instead of turkey and a special potato salad based on a recipe from my dad's mother. And my baba, my mother's mother, made the best *priyaniki*, these little tea cookies, every Christmas until she passed away during my senior year of high school.

All of those happy, feel-good memories were destroyed during my first Christmas home from college.

Emboldened by my experiences after moving away from home for the first time and embracing my new adult self, I decided to come out to my conservative Russian-American family when I visited them for the holidays at the end of my first semester.

It did not go well.

To this day, I don't know how I had convinced myself that their reaction would be different than it was. It's not like I hadn't known their beliefs. That's why I stayed in the closet all through middle and high school.

Perhaps it was the time and distance. I was homesick for them and for Chicago. So when classes ended that first semester, I was excited for Christmas and I wanted to share my joy in owning and understanding my identity as a gay man with the people I cared most about—my family. The LGBTQ+ student group I'd become part of on campus had given me newfound confidence to be my authentic self.

All too fast, I discovered that my parents' strict Orthodox beliefs had not changed one iota in the time I'd been away.

Nor had the views of their priest or the church where they worship.

Deep down, I suspect they had an inkling that I was gay for years, but so long as I never said a word about it or overtly expressed my “sinful” inclinations, they’d been content to pretend I was the straight son they wanted.

Like a naïve fool, that Christmas I came home out and proud. As an only child, I convinced myself my parents would overlook what their beliefs told them about gay people because they loved me so much.

Poor, delusional Sasha.

I also made the catastrophic decision to share the news with them on Christmas Eve, only to find myself summarily dumped out on my ass onto the cold, snowy Chicago streets in the wee hours of Christmas morning. I literally only had the clothes on my back, my phone, and my wallet—they hadn’t even let me pack my suitcase!

In the blink of an eye, they had disowned me. I became invisible to them, as if I’d died or, worse yet, had never even been born.

Devastated doesn’t even begin to describe how I felt. It was like someone reached inside and tried to rip my heart out of my chest while it was still beating. I stood outside my childhood home and cried and begged for them to let me back in. I made a complete fool of myself trying to win back their love, but it had completely vanished, faster than a snowflake landing on your skin and melting into nothing.

Now, eight years later, I have to wonder what the hell love even is.

They haven’t spoken to me since.

Fool that I was, I tried to get them to talk to me though.

For the first six months, I called once a week and left messages, trying to get them to see reason, but they never answered and never relented. Eventually, they changed their number, and I couldn’t call at all.

That was when I knew they were gone from my life forever. Before that, I'd clung to a false hope that their anger would wane in the face of losing their only child. It had been a foolish fantasy, and when it died, it killed the last of my childhood innocence and was the death knell for my Christmas spirit.

Afterward, I threw myself into my schoolwork. I kept busy for the first few years, not giving myself time to think about what happened and what I had lost. Between the demands of school and the nearly full-time hours I was working at a part-time job just to make ends meet—because Los Angeles is fucking expensive—I was able to play the avoidance game for quite a while.

Of course, something had to give at some point. It finally happened in my third year of college. I'd known my mental health was in the crapper but when I couldn't make myself get out of bed for days in a row, I knew I needed help.

I was fortunate that my university had some good resources, and I was able to get into counseling and see a doctor who prescribed some medication to help with my depression. It took a lot of work, but I got healthy again and managed to finish my degree.

I walked that graduation stage alone and with my head held high.

Now, at twenty-six, I'm in a better place about it all. I don't know if one ever gets over being rejected by their family, but I've learned to cope with the loss and move on with my life as best as I can.

If nothing else, I am bound and determined to live my life well. To find success and happiness. I refuse to wallow in sadness and misery. And I absolutely refuse to be ashamed of who I am. No matter what my parents might think. Because fuck them.

Granted, things aren't going according to plan of late, but I keep telling myself it's just a minor pothole in the road of life.

Still, this time of year is always the hardest for me.

While I don't fall into the kind of dark depression I had in the past, I do tend to feel irritated and bitter, especially the closer it gets to the anniversary of my parents tossing me out like garbage.

When I see other people reveling in the season and trying to spread festive cheer, I want to gnash my teeth. When they complain about spending time with their families and loved ones over the holidays, I want to punch them in their stupid fucking faces.

Christmas does indeed turn me into a cynical grinch. Now I like nothing better than to see the other side of it.

Jonesy and I make it to the far end of the park, now steeped in darkness. I frown when I notice several broken lights along the stretch of sidewalk ahead.

My eyes dart around but I can't see hardly any fucking thing.

That's when I start to get a bad feeling.

My gut churns and I'm pretty sure it isn't because of a bad burrito when the hair on the back of my neck also sticks up. With trembling fingers, I fumble into my pocket before yanking out my phone and turning on the flashlight function.

Spinning in a circle, I cast light in every direction but find nothing.

All my senses are on full alert, and I stand there shivering as goose bumps rise all over my body.

I take one careful step and hear a strange humming noise that seems to almost vibrate in the air around me and Jonesy.

With dawning horror and disbelief, I slowly tilt my head up and stare into the night sky only to find it obscured by an enormous shadow.

That's when something out of motherfucking Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* meets *Star Trek IV* happens.

A wide beam of light shoots down and surrounds me and Jonesy where we stand.

My normally quiet cat lets out a hiss and a yowl of displeasure.

I start to hyperventilate as I feel a blanket of energy engulf me.

“Holy shit,” I whisper when the beam of light pulls us up into the air, causing us to levitate for an instant before we’re sucked upward and into the unknown.

I can only hope we aren’t going to end up like those poor schmucks in Jordan Peele’s *Nope*.



Chapter Three

Privately Relayed Intergalactic Communication and Knowledge System (PRICKS)

Stardate: 47634.45

EatMyCometDust: Bro! Don't leave us in the dark. Did you ditch your groom at the altar or what?

DataMaster: Yes! Thank you all for your advice. With the help of friends and an ingenious plan, courtesy of me, I was able to make my escape. Freedom for the win! *winky tentacle emoji*

EatMyCometDust: Right on @DataMaster. I like your moxie, kid.

NebulaNerd: I still think it was a hasty decision but I'm glad you're happy.

DrWhoDaFuck: Nice work! Good for you. I hope you're safe. Now that you've gone rogue, what's the plan?

DataMaster: I thought you'd never ask, DWDF! Two of my best friends decided to join me in my travels around the galaxy. First stop—Earth! *tentacle heart emoji*

EatMyCometDust: Holy cosmic balls! You're traveling all the way to the nether regions, my friend.

DrWhoDaFuck: Do you have Alliance permission to visit? They tend to be rather fussy about that. Humans, delightful as they are, are not yet ready to handle the truth about the existence of other lifeforms in the universe.

DataMaster: Sadly, I do not have a permit, let alone a visa. I don't pass the humanoid appearance test to their standards. My tentacles don't retract and it's not exactly simple to hide them. My skin tone also isn't one indigenous to the planet.

EatMyCometDust: So why in the name of Calliope's Cosmic Cluster are you going all that way if you can't even spend time on Earth?

NebulaNerd: Oh, dear. I have a feeling this is going to be another dangerous and ill-conceived plan.

DataMaster: My plans are **always** amazing @NebulaNerd, and this one is too. I'm going to invite a human to join us for an intergalactic Christmas adventure!

EatMyCometDust: Uh...what now?

DrWhoDaFuck: A dicey but audacious plan, my tentacled friend. Abduction of other species is generally frowned upon by most intergalactic regulatory entities, FYI, so the Alliance will be royally PISSED OFF when they find out. Could be more trouble than it's worth. You don't want to make an enemy out of them.

DataMaster: Look, it's not abduction. Not exactly. They'll be our guest! I just want to borrow a human for a little while to help me simulate an authentic Christmas experience on my ship! After that, I will return them to Earth with plenty of gifts and hearty thanks. Win-win!

EatMyCometDust: Hahahahahaha! Is it wrong that I cannot wait to hear how this all plays out? You're epic, DM!

DataMaster: I like to think so. **winking tentacle emoji**

DrWhoDaFuck: Hey, I've spent a hot night or two with a human in my time. Earth's a cool place to visit if you can, but the Alliance will construe this as abduction, which is a risky proposition. You better watch your back if you go through with this. The Alliance won't be happy and that's the truth!

DataMaster: I WILL make my Christmas dream a reality. Even the Alliance won't be able to get in my way!

KHEPHREN

I spread my arms and all eight of my tentacles wide. “Welcome aboard, Earthling! I am Khephren Thrase and this is my ship, the majestic Sleigh Belle.”

It took me quite a while to select the perfect name for my vessel, but I’m bursting with pride over my final choice.

The rather tiny but attractive human sways on its feet—no doubt unused to being snared by a tractor beam—and stares at all of us with wide eyes. I notice that they’re a most unusual shade of deep gray, the likes of which I’ve never seen before. The human’s short hair is dark and messy, and its skin is pale. When I first watched Earth movies, it took me a while to adjust to the odd lack of variety in human skin tones. Their species appears to only have variations of white, brown, and black pigmentation, whereas my species is far more...colorful, to say the least.

“Do you think this Earthling does not understand us?” Najar asks, a deep frown on his face and a tentacle on the weapon at his hip.

Way to scare our guest, Naj!

I jerk my head at him in warning and he removes his tentacle from the weapon but glares at me, nonetheless.

“Our neural translators have mastered human English and several other languages of this planet. Besides, Kheph used his kickass programming skills to enhance their capabilities to process slang and colloquialisms found in all the movies we downloaded. There shouldn’t be an issue,” Luna says.

I turn back to the young...man, I believe? He’s so pale I fear he might be sick or could faint at any moment. My tentacles writhe with concern.

“Human of Earth, can you understand me?” I ask, using my gentlest tone.

He blinks a few times and then says, “What the *hell* was in that burrito?”

Before I have time to make sense of such a nonsensical statement, I realize the Earthling I have invited aboard the ship is not alone, and I gasp.

A sleek creature with bright golden eyes and blue-gray fur stalks toward me in a manner reminiscent of a mighty hunter on the plains of the Geherenvold.

“By the galactic gods, it is the manifestation of the goddess Thekmis,” Najar whispers in wonder and bends down on one knee before it.

My tentacles vibrate with excitement. “Surely, it’s a sign from the universe!”

“Inconceivable,” Rambo offers.

Luna snorts.

The magnificent creature stalks toward me and begins to rub its body against my legs, winding itself between them while emitting a most soothing rumbling sound.

How marvelous!

“It likes you, Kheph!” Luna says with a grin. “The Goddess shows you favor. Good fortune is surely coming our way.”

“Uh, excuse me? Who the hell are you people...er, aliens, and what the fuck is going on?” The human steps forward and scoops the magical creature into his arms before backing away from us.

We let out a collective “oh!” when the Goddess’s emissary rubs its head under the human’s chin in approval.

This surely cannot be a coincidence.

“I am a *genius*,” I whisper.

Najar sighs.

“Leave it to you to find the most amazing human on Earth, beloved by Thekmis!” Luna says admiringly.

At least she recognizes my brilliance.

With renewed conviction, I take a step closer to the human, only to frown when he takes several steps back. Automatically, and without conscious thought, the tentacles protruding from my back shoot forward to stop him.

His mouth drops open and he shrieks. “What the ever-loving *fuck* are those?”

I take hold of one of my startled appendages and it anxiously wraps around my waist, so I pet it reassuringly. “They’re my tentacles.”

“Uh-huh.” The human swallows and stares. “That’s...uh... nice? They’re very...um...*pink*.”

Of course they are. They match the color of my hair, a beautiful shade of magenta that complements my paler pink skin.

The human continues to stare at my tentacles. Perhaps he is in awe of my beautiful coloring?

After a moment, I figure out what the real issue must be and seek to reassure him. “Never fear, gentle human of Earth. We do not consider you inferior even though you were born with so few appendages. It’s not your fault. You cannot help the genetic limitations of your species,” I offer with a soothing smile.

His withering glare makes my smile waver and my tentacles tremble. Oh, dear. Perhaps I have misstepped somehow?

“Fuck you, Tentacle Boy! Having extra appendages doesn’t make you superior to humans. That’s fucking... speciesist!” He points at each of us accusingly. “Why the hell have you weirdos abducted me and Jonesy? And don’t try to convince me I’m an extra in a new Ridley Scott sci-fi movie!”

I hold up my hands in a placating gesture. “We mean you no harm.” My cheeks warm as I recall his justified accusation. “I’m sorry. You’re quite right. About appendages, I mean. This is my first time interacting with a human, and I’ve realized my own subconscious bias. I appreciate you pointing it out to me.”

His posture remains stiff but some of the anger leaves his eyes.

I brighten. “What is your name, tiny human?”

Unfortunately, once again, I seem to have done something wrong.

He scowls and his gray eyes spit fire. “Fuck you, asshat! I’m not tiny. I’m compact and just the right size for me, fuck you very much.”

My tentacles droop and my bottom lip trembles as I too become upset, mostly with myself. This is not going how I envisioned at all. Despite my adaptations to the neural translator, my communication skills seem to have failed me and I’m really putting a tentacle in my mouth every time I try to speak to this human. Perhaps Thekmis was wrong to bless me and my ship?

I bow deeply. “Forgive me. I didn’t mean to offend you. I keep making grievous mistakes. Interspecies communication can be challenging, far more so than I expected, but that is no excuse. I beg your patience.”

I dart a glance up to find him eyeing me warily before he sighs long and loud, in much the same way Najar often does when Luna or I do something foolish.

“Whatever. Let’s just chalk it up to an interspecies communication error, like you said. I’m Sasha and this is my cat, Jonesy. Now, tell me why we’re here and what you intend to do with us.” He narrows his eyes and adds, “And there better not be any fucking probes involved or I’ll shove all your tentacles up your own ass.”

My tentacles flail as I straighten. “What? No! We would never be so barbaric. You are an esteemed guest on our ship.”

Sasha scoffs. “Guest? Try again, pal.”

I flash my brightest grin. “It’s true, Sasha.” His name rolls off my tongue in a most delightful way. “It’s a pleasure to meet you and have you join us for an intergalactic adventure. Never fear! We mean you and your blessed companion no harm. I have been studying your people for some time and have become quite fascinated with the holiday known as Christmas. We came to seek out a human who could help us create an authentic Christmas experience of our own on this

ship.” My tentacles wriggle with unrestrained enthusiasm but I manage to stop them from clapping each other. “Only a human touch can make my dream a reality. And that’s where you come in!”

Sasha appears far less keen than I expected. “And you chose me because...?”

I spread my tentacles wide. “This location on Earth is where my ship’s coordinates took us. When we arrived, I spent some time scanning local surveillance feeds in search of someone full of Christmas spirit. When I saw you, I knew you were the one I was looking for!”

He glances down at himself and groans. “Oh my god. Are you talking about my outfit?”

“Of course! It’s so wonderfully fun and full of holiday cheer.”

Sasha yanks off what turns out to be a prosthetic ear. “It’s a *costume*! I’m not a real fucking elf.” Then he mutters, “Thank freaking god.”

“Oh, I know that,” I assure him with a smile. “However, I have seen many of your people’s Christmas movies, and I know only those with the greatest holiday cheer will dress up in such costumes for this most wondrous time of year. You must be a true believer in the magic of the season!”

Sasha rubs a hand down his face with a groan. “Look, man, I’m sorry to break it to you, but the only reason I was wearing this stupid costume was for a job. A job that fired me —” He pauses and looks at a clock on what appears to be a human cell phone, “two hours ago, in fact.”

“A job?” I’ve seen some Christmas films with employment revolving around the holiday, but I’ve never understood the purpose. Beyond, of course, the joy that is Christmas.

“Yeah. You know, what you do in order to pay your bills? I had a part-time gig at this cheesy place called Santa’s Winter Wonderland.”

Luna gasps and claps her hands together. “Ooh! That sounds amazing.”

Sasha snorts. “Not really. It was a gimmicky seasonal attraction that charged people way too much money to bring their screaming children to greet a fake Santa Claus and sit on his lap just to get overpriced photos that they can take home to commemorate the occasion.” He shrugs. “Capitalism at its best. After all, Christmas wouldn’t be Christmas if it wasn’t making someone a buck or two.”

Much to my consternation, Sasha does not sound terribly enthusiastic about this wondrous holiday at all. Now it’s my tentacles’ turn to wrap around me and pet me soothingly. “But surely, you have true Christmas spirit in your heart, right?” My voice is small and uncertain.

“All of the Hallmark movies suggest that most humans do. Even if they don’t enjoy Christmas at first, they always do by the end,” Luna offers in agreement and my tentacles wave at her in thanks.

Sasha’s eyes go even wider if that’s possible. “Hold up. Are you telling me you guys have been watching Hallmark Christmas films to learn about humans?”

“No, silly. We watch them because they’re cute and we want to know more about Christmas,” Luna says with a roll of her eyes.

“Yes.” I puff my chest out. “I discovered them a couple of years ago and have been pirating them on the intergalactic web ever since. I know it’s frowned on to access the art and culture of other species without their knowledge, but once I discovered the magic of human cinema, I was a convert. Your people are most creative!”

For the first time since arriving on my ship, Sasha’s eyes spark with obvious interest. “You like movies?”

I nod my head and my tentacles mimic the movement. “I *adore* them!”

Sasha frowns. “I wouldn’t really consider Hallmark Christmas films to be *good* ones. There are so many better representations of human art in the cinematic form. Please tell

me you've watched some of the classics. Alfred Hitchcock? Stanley Kubrick? Spike Lee? Kathryn Bigelow?"

His earnest gaze creates a rather warm feeling deep in the pit of my stomach and makes the tips of my tentacles tingle. To my surprise, my hearts also start to flutter under the intensity of his regard. "I enjoy many types of genres, but I have a special fondness for your Christmas films. Not just the Hallmark ones," I reassure him. "I have watched a wide variety to get a better understanding of this unique holiday. We have nothing like it on my planet and I am most fascinated by it."

Sasha rubs his chin thoughtfully. "There are some good Christmas ones, I suppose. *Die Hard* is a classic. Ooh! *Gremlins* is fun if you haven't seen that one. *Nightmare Before Christmas* is also great, especially if you're new to stop-motion animation."

It's my turn to blink at him. "You are very knowledgeable about this art form, I think."

Sasha flushes with pride. "I'm actually an aspiring filmmaker. I went to USC's film school."

"Galactic gods," Luna whispers. "Is this what they call a 'meet-cute' happening right in front of me?!"

My face flames with embarrassment and my tentacles flail.

"What is a 'meet-cute,' or USC for that matter?" Najar asks.

"Um...I think Luna's getting a little carried away..." I hurriedly interject.

"USC is short for University of Southern California," Sasha explains to Najar.

He nods. "Thank you. We have similar institutions of higher education on our world, but none that study the art of moving pictures."

Luna bounces on her toes, pigtailed jiggling. "A 'meet cute' is when two people meet for the first time in a destined sort of way that signals they're going to fall in love!"

Najar studies me and Sasha thoughtfully. “It does seem significant that Kheph chose a random human who happens to be an expert on movies.”

Luna squeals with excitement. “See, Kheph! Becoming a runaway groom was totally destiny!”

Sasha’s lovely smoky gray eyes dart between the three of us. “What the hell are you guys talking about? This whole situation is a classic sci-fi alien abduction scenario, not a rom-com.” He fixes his gaze on me. “Wait. You’re a runaway groom? What the actual fuck?”

“It’s a long story,” I hasten to say. “For now, just ignore my so-called friends. They’re a little confused, that’s all.” Then I hasten to add, “And this isn’t an abduction, it’s an intergalactic Christmas adventure!”

Sasha has skepticism written all over his lovely face, but he takes a moment to assess me, his eyes roving over my body in a way that makes my tentacles tingle again. “Can I ask what species you all belong to? I mean, you all have fairly humanoid physiology.” He swallows. “Well, apart from those...um, tentacles you each have on your backs, and your wild hair and skin colors.”

I’m instantly grateful for the change of topic. He is right about the fact that our bipedal physiology overall is quite similar to humans in many ways apart from our coloring. For instance, while I am pink all over, Luna is several shades of vibrant green, her hair and tentacles the color of Draveth’s emerald seas and her skin a lighter, softer shade of pale green of the Flumera plant. Najar has tawny-colored skin and vibrant, golden hair and tentacles—and a warrior’s mark on his right cheek.

“Fear not, Sasha. We will have plenty of time to discuss the similarities and differences between our species,” I tell him. “But for now, I think we need to leave.”

He starts as if jolted by an electromagnetic force field. “Whoa! Slow down there, Tentacle Boy. I didn’t exactly agree to go on some space adventure with you all.”

I grin and undulate my tentacles to reassure him. “Don’t worry, we don’t intend to keep you permanently. We just require your assistance to help us create an authentic Christmas experience on the ship. A couple of weeks by your Earth calendar, no more. Afterward, we will return you to your home with many gifts of thanks and seasonal gratitude.”

My plan is perfect!

Sasha clutches the divine creature he calls Jonesy tighter in his arms. “Uh, that’s a real nice offer and all, but I think I’d rather go back home now if it’s all the same to you.”

Luna pouts. “You can’t ruin the meet-cute, foolish human!”

Najar shakes his head. “I told you this was a poorly conceived idea. We should return him and depart quickly. No doubt the Alliance knows we are here illegally and—”

He’s interrupted when my computer’s alarm monitor goes off, blaring throughout the ship.

Sasha darts a worried gaze around. “What’s happening?”

“Nothing to worry about,” I say more confidently than I feel.

A transmission comes through the viewscreen and an angry Iyaran woman with a dark ponytail scowls at me from the other side. “Unauthorized vessel. This is Captain Ellie Genaro of the Alliance of Neutral Alien Lifeforms, the Earth outpost for the Intergalactic Alliance. You have entered Earth’s atmosphere without a permit and have illegally taken a human aboard your vessel. I am ordering you to surrender the human immediately and get the hell off this planet unless you want me to bust a cap in all your asses!”

“Oh dear,” I mutter and scurry over to my seat. My tentacles begin working like mad while I opt to feign confusion. “Hello? Who is this? Sorry, you’re breaking up. We couldn’t quite hear you. Could you repeat yourself?” Meanwhile my tentacles fly across the controls as they calculate a new navigation route and coordinates for our escape.

Captain Genaro gets a very scary look on her face that makes my tentacles want to retract behind me in fear. “Return the human *now* and depart this planet immediately unless you wish to face the full wrath of the Alliance!”

“Oh no! I’m losing you—” I’m able to cut off the transmission before she can begin talking again.

Phew! Close one!

I turn back to my crew and our guest. “Hold on to something. We’re hightailing it out of here.”

Rambo beeps several times. “Scotty, I need warp speed in three minutes or we’re all dead!”

“Wha—” Sasha starts to say but Najar hauls him over to a seat and straps him in before Najar and Luna take their positions. Within moments, our ship is speeding back up and barreling away from the planet. Just as we leave Earth’s atmosphere, another transmission warning begins flashing and the targeting alarm starts blaring. Holy Neptune’s nads! Captain Genaro is *not* messing around. If we don’t get out of here now, the Alliance is going to nab us with a powerful tractor beam I didn’t even know they had.

“I’m activating the light speed drive,” I warn. “Hold on!”

The specially enhanced thrusters power up and in moments we are zipping through space and light-years away to a position of greater relative safety. Stars blur past us and after a few minutes I’m able to deactivate the light speed drive so we can come to a more comfortable cruising speed. We’ll have to steer clear of the intergalactic Alliance for a while, but space is a big place and I’m confident in my navigation skills.

Sasha is clutching a none-too-pleased-looking Jonesy, who makes a yowling noise and demands to be let down. I send my silent apologies to Thekmis and pray she will forgive upsetting her divine emissary.

Once he seems to collect himself, Sasha glares at me. “What part of ‘I want to go home now’ did you not understand, fuckface?”

For once, I have the good grace to look abashed. “About that. Um...yes...well, you see, we were kind of hanging out on Earth without approval from the Alliance, so I needed to get out of there fast.” I raise my hands in a conciliatory gesture. “But don’t worry. We’ll take you back, I promise. Things will have calmed down in a couple of weeks. Then we should be able to slip under the radar again to drop you off and be gone before the Alliance even knows what happened.”

“What freaking episode of *The Twilight Zone* have I walked into?” Sasha mutters.

Rambo beeps three times and then announces, “Welcome to the party, pal.”



Chapter Four

Instagram Post: @ScreamQueenKitty breaks the fourth—I mean chest—wall!

@horrorfilmfanatic666: Your recreation of the chestburster scene in *Alien*, with Jonesy coming out of your chest, is effing epic! Did she mind the fake blood getting on her fur?

Reply @screamqueenkitty: Jonesy is a consummate professional. She barely batted an eye—or rather, paw. Strangely enough, she loves a bath and a blowout. Makes her a perfect star for my work!

@fiercefelinefancy: When are we gonna get some *Pet Sematary* action on this feed? Jonesy could pull off Church. Resurrected evil kitty FTW!

Reply @screamqueenkitty: So many great horror films, so little time. I shall add it to my ever-growing list. *wink emoji*

SASHA

Well, fuck me sideways. I've been abducted by multicolored aliens with tentacles—lots of tentacles—and somehow that doesn't feel as weird as it should right about now.

Maybe I'm in shock?

I don't think so though. Weirdly, the farther away from Earth we go the calmer I become. My life is a clusterfuck right now, and honestly, this doesn't even feel like the worst thing I have to worry about. After all, student loan debt and the imminent resumption of repayment schedules are far more terrifying to me these days.

Sure, deep down, I'm still pretty fucking freaked out, but there's something about these aliens that just doesn't inspire fear. These aren't the terrifying Harvester aliens from *Independence Day*, that's for sure! Maybe I'm naive, but I don't get any dangerous vibes from them. They might have crap taste in movies—really, Hallmark?—but they seem sort of...sweet? Especially the pink one called Khephren, aka Tentacle Boy.

Also, aliens are real! How fucking cool is that? Seriously, this is actually the most interesting thing that's happened to me in far longer than I can remember. For too long I've just been slogging away at whatever jobs I could get to make ends meet. My only pleasure has been working on stuff for my Instagram account, but even that requires time and resources I don't always have.

It's time to face facts. I've been stuck in a rut. Strange how being abducted by aliens can give you some newfound clarity on life, but maybe this whole situation is an opportunity in disguise? Just imagine how I could use this experience to pitch an idea for a movie when I return to Earth!

Tentacle Boy keeps giving me worried looks. It's weird and oddly cute. He seems so genuinely concerned. I sort of want to comfort him, which is totally bananas. But I can't help it. He reminds me of a big pink puppy dog.

Fucking hell. I can't possibly have Stockholm syndrome already, can I?

I voice my one major concern. "So, y'all aren't going to do any creepy medical experiments on me or anything?" I glance meaningfully at their tentacles. "I'm not cool with nonconsensual probing."

Khephren's magenta tentacles, which I must admit are strangely beautiful, flail about him in obvious agitation and he gets this adorable, flustered look on his face. God dammit. That should not be so cute.

"Of course not! While I do admit we...whisked you away against your will, I hope you will think of yourself as a guest on our ship." He holds out his hands, and several tentacles,

imploringly. “That is how we will treat you during your stay with us.”

Guest might be pushing it, but I don’t say anything. “Do you all go around performing alien abductions on the regular? Is that what you guys do for kicks?” Honestly, I’m kind of curious.

The green alien called Luna snorts a laugh while Khephren pales and steps forward, his expression so earnest it melts some of my bitchy sarcasm. “You are the first being we have invited aboard our ship. We do not plan to make this a frequent occurrence.” He flushes. “I know I was being a bit spontaneous, but we’re on a mission to do as many things on our respective bucket lists as possible.”

Just when I didn’t think this whole thing could get any weirder, it does.

“And abducting a human was on someone’s bucket list?”

He shakes his head, his long magenta hair flying with the motion. “No! Like I said before, I want to celebrate a *real* Christmas.” His tentacles and shoulders droop at the same moment. “Alas, because I cannot pass the humanoid appearance test, I am unable to actually set foot on Earth. We snuck our ship in but never landed.”

Okay, I know he mentioned this earlier, but I don’t think I fully processed it then. Now, my mind is agog. Aliens are among us and they’re obsessed with Hallmark films?!

I dart a WTF glance between all three of them. “You want to celebrate... Christmas?”

Khephren and Luna nod their heads, their tentacles uncannily mimicking the motion, while Najjar simply shrugs. Clearly he’s just going along with the wishes of his pals.

“How exactly am I supposed to help you celebrate Christmas in outer space? What do you envision me assisting you with?”

Khephren hesitates for a moment. “Well, I hadn’t fully thought out that part of the plan.” He looks down at his toes, his tentacles seeming almost contrite as they droop around

him. For such a big guy—he’s easily six feet tall in comparison to my five foot six—he somehow manages to shrink in on himself at this moment.

He looks so adorably lost that I can’t help it. I start laughing and I can’t stop. This is all just so fucking wild and ridiculous. Before long I’m wheezing out gasps between loud and only slightly hysterical bursts of giggles, tears streaming down my face.

“Is he all right?” Luna asks.

The more intimidating golden-colored alien, Najar, eyes me warily. “Have we broken him? He’s acting rather... deranged.”

Khephren moves toward me, uncertainty written all over his expressive face. “Sasha? Are you okay? You’re worrying me.”

There’s that concern again in his mesmerizing kaleidoscope eyes. It appears completely genuine, and I feel an unexpected twinge in my chest. I can’t remember the last time anyone actually cared enough to be worried about me.

Several of Khephren’s tentacles reach toward me as if they want to touch me, only to hesitate and retreat before getting too close. I’m relieved but also, to my dismay, a little disappointed.

My emotions are on some kind of bizarre roller coaster right now and I want off this damn ride.

I at last force my laughter to subside, my body aching from the aftermath. “I’m fine. Just embracing the hilarious side of this whole situation.”

Khephren clutches one of his tentacles and begins to pet it almost like I would pet Jonesy.

No, that is *not* cute, dammit!

“Once again, I must express how truly sorry I am that I whisked you away without your consent.” He moves closer and takes hold of my hand, clasping it while he stares deep

into my eyes. “Please believe me when I say we mean you no harm. No, dear human, we honestly just need your help.”

He’s so painfully hopeful and eager that it leaves me speechless. I also have to fight back an unexpected shiver of arousal at his touch.

Fucking hell. I know I haven’t gotten any in a while, but I’m sort of weirded out by my perving on Tentacle Boy. Granted, Khephren is really fucking hot. He’s tall and well-built, and his face is model-level beautiful. And that gorgeous long hair of his. I’ve never had a thing for that before but damn. The guy’s seriously handsome—once you get used to all the pink. And the tentacles, of course.

I glance out the window at the stars. “Do I dare ask where we are now?”

Khephren winces and lets go of my hand. I instantly miss the warmth of his touch.

What the actual fuck? Maybe that tractor beam messed with my brain.

“I’m afraid I had to get us a good distance away in case the Alliance decided to send anyone in pursuit.” He gives me a bright smile. “But never fear. We will be able to get you back home safely and in a timely manner.” He gestures around him with an arm and several tentacles. “Consider our ship your home for the next little while. You are most welcome here.”

“Be our guest, be our guest,” sings the little droid-like robot that comes up to Luna’s hip.

My mouth drops open as I realize something I should have noticed much sooner. “Wait up. Does your robot friend only speak in film lines?”

Luna grins at me, dimples showing in her green cheeks. “That’s right. This is Rambo,” she says proudly. “I programmed him myself.”

Rambo beeps a little tune and whirls in a circle around Luna. “Johnny Five, alive! No disassemble!”

“That’s seriously fucking cool. You guys weren’t kidding about liking human movies. That’s hardcore but I respect it.”

Luna grins.

I’m starting to like these aliens.

Even if they did kidnap me.

Khephren flushes again. “It’s mostly me and Luna. Najar isn’t quite as enthusiastic about them.”

Najar rolls his eyes. “Not necessarily true. I like some movies. You two are simply over-the-top fans.”

I brighten. Nothing makes me happier than talking about all things cinema. “I should show you guys my Instagram account.” I pull out my phone but realize I have no signal out here. Thankfully, I’ve archived some of my best work on my phone’s internal storage so I can take the opportunity to show them my passion project.

“As I mentioned, I’m an aspiring filmmaker.” I scratch my leg and adjust myself in the itchy as fuck tights. “The job at Santa’s Winter Wonderland was just to make ends meet until I get my big break, you know? In the meantime, I’ve created an Instagram account where I recreate famous scenes from iconic horror films with Jonesy in the role of the lead character.”

Luna’s eyes widen and she waves her green tentacles in the air like a cheerleader. “I freaking love horror movies!” She jerks a thumb and a tentacle toward Khephren. “But this weenie can’t handle them.”

I cock my head and study him.

Khephren’s pink cheeks darken, and he crosses his arms. “I don’t like scary stuff, okay? We just have to agree to disagree on this subject.”

I shake my head sadly. “You’re missing out on some great stuff.” I move over to Luna’s side and hand her my phone.

She avidly starts scrolling through my archived scene recreations featuring Jonesy, oohing and ahhing the whole time. Soon, Najar crowds in beside her to check out the screen as well.

“That’s quite impressive,” he murmurs. “Thekmis must favor you above all others.”

“Thekmis? What are you talking about?” They mentioned something similar earlier.

“On our home world, the goddess Thekmis often appears to chosen individuals in the form of a creature, not unlike your companion, Jonesy,” Najar explains.

I gawk at them. “You mean a cat?”

He stares at me uncomprehendingly.

“Don’t you have cats on your world?”

They all look at each other.

Khephren chimes in. “We do not have creatures like this on our planet apart from in our legends.”

I let out a nervous laugh. “Well, Jonesy is not related to any kind of divinity.” I pause. “Although I do suppose in some human cultures, like ancient Egypt, cats were associated with the spiritual realm and the goddess Bastet.”

Khephren’s eyes practically sparkle with excitement. “Your people also realize the divinity of these fine creatures! It is a true blessing to have one aboard our ship.” He turns to Jonesy, who has returned from her explorations as if summoned, and Khephren bows deeply to her. “You are most welcome here, Jonesy. You bring good favor and fortune to me and my crew. We will worship you accordingly while you are here.”

He, Luna, and Najar all clasp a hand over what I assume are their hearts and bend at the waist.

Jonesy seems to take this as her due and lifts a paw that she begins to lick delicately, preening and posing under their attention.

Oh, dear God. I’ve been kidnapped by tentacled aliens who think my cat is connected to a goddess. Maybe I was too hasty in thinking they were harmless and that this would all be okay? I mean, I just lost my job. I’m deeply in debt—fuck you, student loans—and I have no money. And now I have no

real way of getting home either apart from depending on the honesty and kindness of my captors.

Fuck my motherfucking life.

Khephren shuffles awkwardly on his feet. “I know this has been a trying evening for you. You look as if you need rest. Let me show you to your quarters. We have a cabin set aside for you during your time here with us.”

And just like that, something inside me gives, and I feel like I could sleep for a million years. It’s been a bit of a day after all.

Yawning widely, I follow him. It wouldn’t hurt to check out this cabin. Also, my overloaded backpack is starting to feel like the weight of Gibraltar on my back. I need somewhere to stash it.

We go through several corridors before we reach one lined with doors. “These are the crew quarters,” he explains. “The Sleigh Belle can house up to about ten active crew members but for now it’s just three of us.” He looks down almost shyly. “Or rather, the four of us now that you are here.”

I don’t know what to say to that and Khephren looks away to hide his embarrassment. We stop in front of an entrance and his tentacles whip out and begin punching something into a keypad next to it. Then, like something out of Star Trek, the door gives a pressurized hiss, and slides open. I hesitate for a moment before entering, not sure what to expect, but I find that it’s surprisingly simple. There’s a large bed in the center of the room that looks not unlike one from Earth, and there appears to be storage and shelving integrated into the walls.

Khephren takes a moment to show me the en suite bathroom as well. Their version of a toilet is a little bit different but not too intimidating. And the enormous shower looks heavenly. That’s when I realize I have a little bit of a problem.

“Uh,” I say, feeling all kinds of awkward. “What am I going to do for clothes? I’m afraid I don’t have any in my

bag.” In all fairness, how was I to know I should have packed it in preparation for an alien abduction?

Khephren pauses and strokes his chin with one of his tentacles. That is so bizarre to get used to seeing. “Our synthetic goods generator should be able to fashion some new garments for you to wear while you are here.” He walks over to a panel on the wall and inputs a code before it slides open to reveal a shelf that reminds me of the replicator in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*.

Khephren turns to me and eyes me up and down before nodding to himself. His tentacles are a blur as they fly over the machine’s screen and within moments several pairs of pants, undergarments, and shirts materialize on the shelf. The style is a little different from human clothing but not horribly bizarre.

“Will these suffice?” he asks.

“I think so. I’ll try them on later.” My brain jolts as Jonesy brushes past my leg with a little rub. “Um, Jonesy is going to need a litter box.”

Khephren blinks at me in confusion.

How do I explain this? “Jonesy is a domesticated animal, but she still has bodily functions and is used to using a container that has a bed of moisture-absorbing material to relieve herself.”

“Ah! Yes, we have some house-dwelling animal species that are trained to use something similar.” Khephren turns back to the machine, tentacles flying over the screen as he inputs information. Within moments, a very serviceable litter tray materializes on the shelf complete with a layer of lining I don’t recognize but will presumably do the job.

“Thank you,” I say, setting the tray up in the bathroom for Jonesy. I heave a sigh of relief after she sniffs it for a few seconds and then hops right in and does her business.

When I return, Khephren darts a shy but excited glance at me. “Let me show you one more thing before I leave you to rest.”

He hurries over to the far wall and presses a large button. This time a series of shades ascend and reveal an amazing panoramic window that frames a mind-boggling view of outer space.

I shuffle forward, unable to look away. This moment is perhaps even more surreal than when that beam of light sucked me and Jonesy up into the ship.

“It’s beautiful,” I whisper as I stare at the vast expanse of the universe before me.

Never in my wildest dreams did I ever imagine I would find myself on an alien ship far beyond where humanity has ever gone before in the universe. The monumental nature of this is suddenly quite overwhelming.

Khephren stares out the window, his remarkable kaleidoscope eyes practically sparkling. “I’ve dreamed of exploring the universe and finding my destiny among the stars. It was a long and difficult road to get to this point, but I’m finally making my dreams come true.” He beams at me. “It’s breathtaking out here, isn’t it?”

“I will never forget this for the rest of my life.” And that’s the truth.

He looks down and shuffles his feet. “I hope I can give you some unique adventures while you are with us. And we can all experience the wonder of Christmas together.”

I feel a twinge of pain in my chest. “I’ll try but I haven’t celebrated Christmas in a long time.”

He tilts his head, his tentacles gently undulating behind him. “Why not?”

I sigh and rub my eyes. “It’s personal and not something I feel comfortable telling you just yet.”

His expression softens. “Of course. I won’t pry. But I hope we can become friends while you are here.”

He extends his hand and I reach out to shake it.

When we touch, once again I feel a spark race down my arm and he jolts as well. Before I realize what’s happening,

two of his pink tentacles have encircled my wrist and are gently massaging me there.

I gape, unable to utter more than a squeak.

The unusual appendages are surprisingly soft and warm. They're also incredibly gentle.

I find I like how they feel way too much. Fuck.

Khephren flushes, using his hands to pry his tentacles off me. He gives them a light smack. "Naughty tentacles!" he mutters, and they shrink back in an almost guilty manner.

I shake my head, trying to dislodge all the naughty thoughts I'm starting to have about them! "I think I need to get some sleep. I don't know what time it is back on Earth, but it's probably past my bedtime. This has been a long and wild day." I don't bother with subtlety as I lead him to the door. After everything that's happened, I need some time to myself to process it all. "We can talk more in the morning."

"Of course! My apologies. I hope you find your room comfortable. If you need anything, just use this intercom," he says, pointing to a small screen on the wall by the bed.

"Thanks."

He stands there for a moment, tentacles waving awkwardly and opening and closing his mouth as if he wants to say something. But then he finally gives me a goofy smile and whirls around before racing out of the room in a manner that makes it hard to hold back the grin overtaking my face.

Tentacle Boy is kind of a weirdo, but a cute one at that.

Soon, I'm yawning again.

I yank off the ridiculous elf costume that I will happily donate to Khephren and his crew. Any of them can wear it if they want to be *festive*.

Stripped down to my boxers, I take care of my business in the bathroom and then get into bed with a sigh of relief. I can't stop a low moan as I slide under the soft, silky sheets. This bed is utterly divine, so much better than my cheap mattress and

box spring combo I have back in my dingy apartment. This is some high-end shit that I could get very used to.

As far as alien abductions go, this could be a whole hell of a lot worse.

Much to my delight and relief, Jonesy soon jumps up to join me, settling her warm body near my head. She's recovered from our tractor beam experience and is settling in quite comfortably. Like her cinematic namesake, Jonesy is highly resourceful and can adapt to survive in almost any situation. She's a total feline badass.

For several long minutes, I stare out the panoramic window across the room. I keep telling myself I should be scared shitless but all I can feel right now is awe and a growing sense of excitement.

I can't shake this notion that my life has taken a new and offroad path into the unknown—and I like it.



Chapter Five

Privately Relayed Intergalactic Communication and Knowledge System (PRICKS)

Stardate: 47634.46

DataMaster: Any ideas on how to make a human feel like a valued guest on my ship?

NebulaNerd: You mean the human you abducted against their will?

EatMyCometDust: Oooh, you're full of shade this evening, @NebulaNerd! I dig it.

DataMaster: It wasn't like that! Okay, maybe it was a little like that. But we were super nice and courteous during our whole whisking away process.

DrWhoDaFuck: *snort* I wish I had a spycam on board to witness that!

NebulaNerd: That poor human is probably terrified.

DataMaster: *worried tentacle emoji* You think so? That would be terrible! He's my guest and I want him to have a pleasant time aboard my ship. What should I do?

NebulaNerd: Not sure "pleasant" goes with the whole abduction experience.

EatMyCometDust: I'm vibing with this side of you, @NebulaNerd! Snarky shade turns me on. *winky emoji*

DataMaster: *three worried tentacle emojis* What should I DO? I don't want him to be scared!

DrWhoDaFuck: Calm down, bro. Treating him like a guest is a good start. Make sure to talk to him. Explain things that are new to him. Try to learn what he likes. Find ways to show you care and want him to be comfortable.

EatMyCometDust: Keeping it real, DWDF. Sage advice, my friend.

DataMaster: Phew. Okay, I can do that. He's quite fascinating. I want to learn more about him.

EatMyCometDust: Oooh! Do I smell a whiff of romance in the air?

DataMaster: Uh...no. Of course not. Bye.

KHEPHREN

“Your tentacles are soooo big!”

I gulp as Sasha takes hold of one of my enthusiastic limbs and begins to pet and stroke it.

Before long, he finds the sensitive underside and his warm, lingering touch sends a shudder of need coursing through my body.

“You like them?” I ask, hearing the breathy note in my voice. I can't contain my excitement at this moment.

Sasha lets the tentacle wrap itself around his arm before using his free hand to take another one, which he begins to stroke up and down in a salacious mimicry of a hand job.

Little does he know I get fairly similar pleasure when he does that to my tentacle as I would if he was doing it to my dick.

Sasha flashes me a sultry, half-lidded gaze. Those mysterious dark gray eyes of his call to me.

I lick my lips. “I'm surprised you're so comfortable with them. I thought humans would be terrified of another being with so many more appendages.”

Sasha gives me a slow, wicked grin. “I'm not any ordinary human, Tentacle Boy.”

Oof! He can say that again. I've never been so drawn to another being in my life. There's something about him that makes it hard for me to look away. I want to know everything about him, to peel back the layers of his grumpy exterior and learn what lies beneath.

But right now, I desperately want to get to know every square inch of his compact little body. Sasha may be small in stature, but he has a beautifully toned physique that makes my tentacles twitch with the desire to hold him and pleasure him and make him mine.

"I find your tentacles highly arousing," he says, his voice a throaty purr that makes me groan.

"We shouldn't do this," I protest feebly. "You're my guest on this ship even though we sort of accidentally on purpose abducted you."

"That's right. You abducted me so hard," he murmurs, moving the tip of my tentacle to his face and gently rubbing it across his cheeks.

I groan as my cock strains against my breeches and I fight to hold back from coming.

Before I can formulate a response in my dazed mind, he says, "Since I'm stuck here with you for a while, why don't we make the most of it?"

He licks his lips suggestively and flicks his tongue out against the tip of my tentacle.

I give a full-body shudder and my eager appendage jerks in his hand. His grip is firm and oddly knowledgeable about my secret erogenous zones for a human.

Sasha regards me for a moment before opening his mouth and boldly sucking the tip of my tentacle inside.

My hips jerk and I cry out—

The sound of my morning alarm blares throughout the bedroom, and I startle awake, my tentacles flailing. Except for the one that's wrapped around my aching, hard erection.

Neptune's nads!

I can't believe I had a sex dream about my guest. My *human* guest.

But it was the hottest thing I've experienced in far too long.

I flop back on the bed and let my industrious tentacle go back to work on my dark pink, swollen cock. No sense in wasting all the hard work my subconscious did to get me all hot and bothered.

Evidently I'd been pretty close to the edge in my dream because it only takes a few quick strokes before I'm coming with a triumphant shout.

After lying boneless and sated for several minutes, I finally drag myself out of bed to clean up in my shower. Under the stream of hot recycled water, I clean myself thoroughly using my nicest soap and shampoo. They have delightful aromas that have garnered many favorable responses from others in the past.

It's not that I'm trying to impress Sasha. I'm just trying to put my best foot forward in the hope that we can become friends.

My tentacles tingle as I think back on my dream. I'm honest enough with myself to admit that I find the man remarkably handsome and intriguing. But I have a duty and a responsibility on this ship first and foremost.

I should not be attempting to woo a man I intend to return to his home world before long and who I did, in fact, abduct.

Granted, my intentions were pure.

Mostly.

However, it's not as if Sasha has any way of getting home without my assistance. The power dynamic in this situation is far too problematic for my spicy dream to become a reality. Right? I don't wish to take advantage of him, no matter how attractive I find him.

Once I'm clean and I've donned fresh clothing for the day, I leave my room and head for our ship's canteen. It's basically

our small cooking and dining space, but I thought it sounded much snazzier to call it the canteen.

As I stand before the food simulator, I'm momentarily uncertain of what to do.

What does Sasha enjoy for breakfast? Human movies seem to present Earthlings eating a wide variety of foods in the morning, most of which I can't entirely replicate. Can Sasha even eat some of the foods that we more commonly create and consume on the ship?

I realize there's a slight glitch in my plan to have a human aboard the Sleigh Belle. None of our food is Terran and the simulator is only programmed with information about edible substances from our home world.

Immediately, I'm anxious and uncertain. Looking for answers, I tap the screen on the wall to begin conducting some preliminary research.

Humans appear to be fairly omnivorous as a species, although my research does show that some have more restricted and specialized diets depending on varying health and cultural reasons.

I frown. I will need to ask Sasha about his preferences and if he possesses any food allergies or other things I would need to be aware of.

As if summoned by my thoughts, Sasha comes padding into the room, wearing the plain shirt and lightweight pants I created for him the day before.

I beam at him. "Good morning, Sasha."

He yawns and runs a hand through his sleep-tousled hair, the dark tufts standing on end in many different directions. I find it charmingly adorable.

"It's kind of surreal going to bed in the dark and waking up in the dark," he says.

"I've found it quite an adjustment as well."

Sasha blinks at me in confusion. "Haven't you been traveling in space for a while?"

I shift nervously, my tentacles twitching. “Actually, this is my first time traveling off-planet by myself.”

Sasha’s mouth drops open, and his eyes go comically wide. “Oh, shit. Please tell me you guys know what the hell you’re doing out here. We’re not going to crash or be sucked into a black hole or something, right?”

I laugh, delighted by him. “Of course not. My species has been traveling the universe for centuries. The technology on this ship is state of the art, and Luna and I are capable of fixing almost any problem that might arise.”

Sasha cocks his head. “If your species has been traveling so long, why is this your first time?”

My tentacles rub against each other, seeking reassurance. “It’s a long story. How about I tell you over breakfast?”

I usher him toward the food simulator, but he stares at it blankly.

“What would you like for breakfast?” I ask.

Sasha stares at the machine. “Um, do you have coffee? Maybe some eggs and toast?”

My tentacles tap on the screen as I do a quick search for something that would be similar to the foods Sasha mentioned.

“I’m afraid we do not have comestibles from your world on this ship. However, the simulator can make things similar to certain Earth dishes though.” I input some more information into the simulator. In moments, the panel slides open, and I take out the steaming mug and pass it to Sasha. “Try this. We call it *kavga*. It’s similar to coffee.”

Sasha regards the cup dubiously for a moment before giving it a delicate sniff. A slow smile spreads across his face. “Smells quite like coffee, just stronger and a bit smokier.” He takes a cautious sip and then another. “It reminds me a bit of chicory coffee in New Orleans but a little nuttier.” He narrows his eyes. “Please tell me this contains caffeine.”

“Of course.”

“Good,” he murmurs as he sips at his drink. “Mmm. It does seem to have a bit of kick. I’m feeling more awake already.”

A rush of warm pleasure fills my chest. I like making him happy.

My enthusiasm takes a hit when the food simulator gives me bad news. I turn to Sasha with a frown. “I’m afraid we do not eat bird ovum on my planet so the computer indicates that we can’t simulate anything like chicken eggs.”

Sasha considers this. “What about oatmeal?”

My tentacles are a blur as I update my request. I sigh with relief and smile. “We have a similar grain that can be cooked into a nourishing porridge full of vitamins and minerals.”

“If you can add some fruit to it, that would be great. Gotta keep up my Vitamin C, especially since I’ve never been to space. My immune system might be weak against any new viruses or bacteria I encounter.”

I gasp and my tentacles fly across the screen with frantic urgency. “Don’t worry! We have a number of fruits from my world that should provide immunity-boosting vitamins for humans. Wait just a moment.”

As the simulator works on creating Sasha’s meal, I mentally add to my list the need for us to safeguard him against illness while he is our guest.

Once the simulator’s panel opens again, I pull out two bowls of Dravethian porridge and fresh fruit for us to share. We take everything over to the table and sit.

I test a spoonful of mine first, pleased with how it turned out. My instructions were to add Moras birch sap, a natural sweetener from my world, and some fragrant spices to complement it.

Sasha soon follows suit and murmurs appreciatively. “This is delicious. Whatever you sweetened it with reminds me of maple syrup back home.”

“I’m glad it’s to your liking. Dravethians have a physiological makeup that is similar to your species minus the tentacles. All of my research from the Alliance indicates humans can eat most of the foods on my world, but I will be sure to check suitability every time. Your safety is my top priority.” I frown. “You aren’t allergic to any foods, are you? Oh dear, I should have asked first!” I stare at his half-eaten bowl of food in horror.

Sasha chuckles and takes a hearty sip of his *kavga*. “Simmer down, Tentacle Boy. I don’t have any food allergies. Or, at least, none that I know of. Everything is fine.”

My tentacles slump in relief. “Thank goodness.”

He eyes me curiously. “So, tell me more about how this is your first time in space. I was under the impression you’d been doing this a while.”

I puff my chest out at his unintentional compliment. “Luna and I refurbished this ship over the last few years, making it our ideal vessel for long-term travel across the universe. Originally, our plan was to leave in another year or two, but the timeline got moved up rather unexpectedly.”

Sasha finishes his food and sips at his drink, his expression attentive. “What happened?”

I sigh. “On my world, those like me and Luna are expected to marry a member of the warrior class. Because we weren’t born with a warrior mark, we’re considered vulnerable to danger.” I scowl. “Even though we can take care of ourselves, most don’t view it that way. Luna and I also possess talents in hot demand. I’m a computer programmer and Luna is an engineer of the highest caliber. Our people believe we should be protected at all times.”

Sasha frowns. “In other words, they don’t trust you to be independent and take care of yourselves?”

“Exactly! My dream has always been to leave our world and travel the stars. But my parents refused to let me go until I married a warrior to keep me safe.” I scowl. “Which is utter crap because warriors don’t want to travel the universe; the

warrior mark means a warrior's first duty is to keep our home world safe. I was never going to be able to find someone who would support me and my dreams." I give him a beseeching look. "You have to believe me, I did try. For several years. When I had no luck, my parents decided to get involved."

Sasha's brow furrows with concern. "What did they do?"

I slump in my seat. "They arranged a marriage between me and a warrior."

"Against your will?" The frown that returns to Sasha's face is dark and I get a little thrill thinking he might be even slightly worried about me.

"Unfortunately, yes. They didn't want to listen to me or my protestations. In the end, I only had one option."

Sasha stares at me with interest. "Which was?"

"I left my fiancé at the ceremony and became a runaway groom."

To my amazement, Sasha spits a mouthful of kavga all the way across the table before starting to cough.

My tentacles flail with concern. "Are you all right?"

Sasha coughs and clears his throat, but his voice still comes out hoarse. "Did you say you were a runaway groom?"

"Indeed! I learned this trope from a number of your most excellent rom-coms." I hesitate. "Although it seems the trope is more often a runaway bride in those films." I shrug. "Humans are oddly binary in their gender depictions. I feel like a groom, or any nonbinary individual getting married for that matter, is equally feasible."

Sasha blinks at me for a moment and then throws his head back and laughs. "That's amazing. You crack me up." He leans an elbow on the table and rests his chin in his palm. "So, have you learned everything you know about humanity from movies?"

I flush. "For the most part. I have been able to acquire some of your novels as well. But I have to admit, I do prefer

films and some television shows. I tend to be very visually oriented.”

Sasha studies me with bright eyes. “Weirdly, I know exactly what you mean. I have a lot of friends who are total book nerds, and I’m completely cool with that. But movies have always been my thing. They just speak to me more, you know?”

My tentacles wave happily in the air, and I bounce in my seat. “I do know! It’s so refreshing to meet someone who understands my love for the art form. Most of my people feel my interest is foolish. Granted, they do enjoy your action and war films.”

Sasha gets a dreamy look to his countenance that replaces his usually more serious one. “I like almost every genre. There are great classics to be found anywhere you go looking. Even some ‘bad’ ones can be good, ya know?” He nods and extends his hand. “I think we should shake on that, from one cinephile to another.”

Before I can even think about it, one of my tentacles instinctively reaches out and wraps itself around his hand before giving it a gentle shake. The feel of his skin is just as captivating as the first time I touched him. I can’t get enough.

Sasha stares at my tentacle with wide eyes.

Oops.

I forgot he’s still new to beings with so many more appendages.

“I’m sorry. My tentacles sometimes have a will of their own.”

To my surprise, he doesn’t pull away. Instead, he tentatively reaches out his other hand to lightly stroke the top of my tentacle, making me shiver at the sensation.

“They’re surprisingly soft. Almost velvety,” he murmurs, fascination gleaming in his eyes.

Meanwhile, my eyes are starting to glaze over with pleasure as he continues to pet my tentacle before his gaze lifts

to meet mine. “May I ask why your species has tentacles? On Earth, only a very few aquatic species have appendages like this.”

One of my tentacles reaches out and slaps my cheek with a light tap, jerking me out of my daze. Talk about embarrassing.

I focus back on Sasha’s words, secretly pleased by his question. I’m beginning to realize he possesses an inherently curious nature that I can relate to. Far from being frightened of me and my crew, he seems more interested in learning about us and making the most of his experience.

My tentacles sway in the air in obvious satisfaction. They’ve made it abundantly clear to me that they like Sasha and want to get to know him much better.

Intimately, even.

My mind wanders back to the erotic dream I had before I was so rudely awakened earlier, and I feel my face and the tips of my tentacles warm.

I clear my throat. “That is an excellent question. The scientific and anthropological experts on my world are not entirely certain, from an evolutionary perspective, why we developed them. However, I can say that they are instrumental in how my species performs in battle. They also make us better equipped to multitask, as you call it. Our brains are able to focus on having multiple limbs doing different tasks at the same time. This is particularly helpful to me as a computer programmer. Each tentacle assists me.”

Sasha considers this. “Wow. That’s pretty impressive. About you, I mean. But how exactly do tentacles help warriors on your planet?”

“Our planet is rich with valuable natural resources, so we often become the target of other species that are willing to wage war against us to gain control of those resources. One of our many advantages in battle is the number of extra limbs we possess. Our tentacles can wield additional weapons at one time, and they help us move more quickly when necessary.”

Sasha’s eyebrows wing upward. “That sounds cool.”

I grin. “When we wish to move incredibly fast, we don’t use our feet at all because our tentacles propel us that much faster.”

Sasha shakes his head slowly. “I bet that looks pretty freaking awesome in action. It would be so amazing to put in a movie.” His eyes brighten again, and he whips out his phone and begins tapping away at the screen.

It’s my turn to frown. “What are you doing?”

“Making a note to myself,” he says, not bothering to look up. “I’m keeping a detailed record of my experience on this ship. It’s the perfect opportunity for me to get firsthand experience that could be the key to a blockbuster movie in my future.”

He grins as he taps away at his phone, and I can’t help but feel a warmth unfurl in my chest at the sight. Making Sasha smile is something I want to do more often for some reason.

After a moment, he puts his phone away. “Sorry about that. I needed to get the idea down while it was fresh.”

“I completely understand.” I have to do that all the time with my own projects. When an idea strikes, you have to note it before you forget it!

“Also, I’m sorry that your parents tried to force you into a marriage with someone you don’t love.” Sasha shakes his head. “That really sucks.” He hesitates and asks haltingly, “Do they...do they love you?”

I stare at him. “Of course they do. I mean, yes, they’re a bit heavy-handed. They don’t always want to listen to me because my views are so contrary to the status quo on my world, but it’s not as if they haven’t known I was different for a long time.” I shake my head. “I am what I believe you Earthlings call a ‘black sheep.’”

Sasha’s lips twitch with amusement. “That’s the term, for sure.”

I beam with satisfaction. “Yes, well I am the black sheep of my family, and I have always forged my own path. In time, my parents will come to accept this recent choice of mine.”

Sasha appears worried. “Have you spoken to them since you did your disappearing act?”

His question is a kick in the tentacle, and I flinch. “Uh... not yet.”

Sasha’s mouth drops open. “You just hightailed it off the planet without a word to them? They must be worried.”

I squirm guiltily in my seat. He’s probably right.

“Have they tried to contact you?”

I hunch my shoulders. “I don’t know. I’ve kept my com off since we left home.”

Sasha inhales sharply, his nostrils flaring. “No matter how mad you might be, you should talk to them and soon.” He shakes his head. “If you value your relationship with them, you should let them know you’re okay. Then you need to have an open, honest conversation with them.”

I slump in my seat. “Believe me, I’ve tried. They’re incredibly stubborn and they think they know what’s best for me.”

Sasha frowns. “Are they okay with your sexuality?”

I tilt my head as I consider him. “Of course. We don’t have such hang-ups on my planet.”

“Must be nice,” Sasha mutters, a dark look that I can’t quite decipher overtaking his face.

“The bigger issue is that I’m well past the age of maturity and have not yet found a partner who can protect me in the eyes of my people and my family.”

Sasha looks me up and down. “No offense, but they must not see what I see. You’re pretty built and look like you could handle yourself just fine. Why would your parents feel you needed someone else to protect you?”

I beam at him again. It’s like this man really *gets* me! “My point exactly.” I sigh. “They’re not totally wrong. Our world faces a number of threats on a semi-regular basis and being married to a warrior *would* afford me greater protection, but

with it comes an expectation that I would be a dutiful househusband, taking care of all the domestic labor and keeping a home for my spouse. Warriors are venerated as the most valuable class of citizenry on my planet, and those fortunate enough to marry into that upper social echelon are typically expected to subsume their needs and wants to those of their partner.”

Sasha scowls. “That sounds like some patriarchal bullshit to me.”

It’s my turn to quirk my lips. “Perhaps, although women are warriors on my world as well. If a man or a woman were to marry a female warrior, they would be expected to take on the same duty. It has less to do with gender than it does with social status.”

Sasha shakes his head. “Still sounds pretty fucked up. I’m glad you got away.”

“As am I.” In the short time since we took to the stars, I’ve felt a heavy weight lift from my shoulders. I’m even sleeping better.

Apart from unexpected sex dreams, that is.

“So, you said you wanted to travel the universe but you’re also a computer programmer? Does that mean programming ships is your passion?”

“Traveling the universe, seeing its myriad wonders, and meeting many different beings is the adventure I’ve craved my whole life. My talents as a computer programmer have made that dream more of a reality since I was able to refurbish the main system of this ship. However, my true passion project is a bit of a secret.” I pause for a moment, then decide to ask him some questions as well. “I’ve told you a bit about my dreams of traveling the universe, but what about you? What are your dreams?”

Sasha’s expression shutters and he shrugs. “Honestly, I don’t know anymore. When I was younger and way too naive, my goal was to become the next big film director in Hollywood. But since I graduated from film school, I haven’t

done much beyond low-level production assistant work, and even that's been pretty spotty since the start of the pandemic a few years ago." He grimaces. "It's hard to make movies without money, connections, or resources. And I have none. Instead, I have a mountain of student loan debt from my studies at USC. And shortly before y'all abducted me—excuse me, whisked me away—"

"To be our guest," I interject. I feel it's an important distinction that can't be overlooked.

He rolls his eyes. "I was at a massively low point in my life with very few prospects ahead of me." He lets out a derisive snort. "I guess you could say I don't have a whole lot to go back to. After all, it's just me and Jonesy in this world."

I freeze, pondering the implications of his words. "Do you not have a family?"

He looks away. "Not anymore." His words come out in a hoarse whisper.

I want to press him for more information, but I get the sense that would not be welcome. I will bide my time and hope I can convince him to trust me with his past and his secrets.

Realizing I need to first make a gesture to show that I trust him, I decide to share one of my biggest secrets with Sasha.

"Would you like to join me to see what my secret passion project is? It's in a special room."

Sasha eyes me warily. "What do you mean, 'a special room'?" His eyebrow arches. "It's not a sex dungeon, I hope."

My tentacles wave in the air with renewed excitement. "No, it's much better! I call it the Augmented Reality Simulation Environment. It is a computer-programmed room that creates three-dimensional environments a person can interact in. Almost as if one is entering a movie and playing the main character themselves."

"Holy fucking balls. You have a holodeck?" Sasha asks incredulously.

I tilt my head. “No, it’s not a holodeck, whatever that is. It’s an Augmented Reality Simulation Environment.”

Sasha chuckles. “I’ve gotta see this. Game on. Show me the way to this secret not-a-holodeck room.”



Chapter Six

Instagram Post: @ScreamQueenKitty is the Final Girl Michael Myers doesn't want to mess with!

@slasherslayersupreme: Jonesy Lee Curtis slaying like a queen!

Reply @screamqueenkitty: Her knife-like claws could definitely give Michael Myers a run for his money!

@gorehound89: Nice composition, man. Your attention to detail and knowledge of the classics is refreshing. Keep it up.

Reply @screamqueenkitty: Thanks, friend. This account is very much an homage to the horror film greats and an attempt to turn my rescue cat into a star. She's got the "IT" factor for sure!

SASHA

Khephren takes me to his not-a-holodeck and I can't help but notice that he's practically bouncing off the walls while we navigate through the passageways of the ship. He's also talking nonstop, his tentacles swishing through the air like they seem to do when he gets overstimulated. The guy's rattling off all kinds of details about the computer programming involved in this venture of his, which quite frankly goes way over my head.

But I'm damn near vibrating with excitement. I may not be the world's biggest Star Trek fan, but I used to watch old episodes of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* with my baba. When I was growing up, she had a particular fondness for

Patrick Stewart as Captain Jean-Luc Picard. I, however, found Worf much hotter.

Sexy-grumpy Klingons aside, it was actually the holodeck that fascinated me most about the Enterprise. The idea of a virtual reality space that could be programmed to simulate all kinds of stories and scenarios was catnip to me. As a wannabe filmmaker, I thought it seemed like pure magic.

At the recollection, I feel a strange kind of eagerness bubble up inside my chest that I haven't felt since before I graduated from film school. I'm looking forward to this more than I anticipated.

We stop in front of a closed door toward the back of the ship and Khephren quickly enters a code that gives us access to the room.

The space is surprisingly large and completely empty, with the floors, walls, and ceiling all done in white. In one corner of the room is a compact terminal mounted on the wall. Khephren heads over to it.

"This is the mainframe for the Augmented Reality Simulation Environment," he explains. "I can create and customize a myriad of immersive scenarios to enjoy."

Something finally clicks in my far too slow brain and I can't hold back a snort. "Um, no offense, but you do realize the acronym for this room is somewhat unfortunate, right?"

He stares at me in total incomprehension.

"A-R-S-E? Come on. Tell me you know what ARSE means."

He tilts his head. "My neural linguistic adapter has largely been trained on human movies particular to North America. I do not believe I am familiar with that term."

"Arse is another way of saying ass, but it tends to be used more commonly by British English speakers and Aussies, I think."

Khephren considers this for a moment, then waves a hand and several tentacles dismissively. "A trifling concern. I don't

intend to sell this technology to humans so it shouldn't be a problem. Now, let me show you what it can do." He steps in front of the terminal and all eight tentacles and his hands move in a blur over the controls. If he has top secret technological information he doesn't want shared, then he has nothing to fear from me. There's no way I could keep up with any of what he's doing. Quite frankly, stuff is moving across the screen so fast I can't even visually register it. I'm starting to wonder if those kaleidoscope eyes of his have different visual capabilities than the traditional human eye.

After several moments of Khephren focusing intently on his task, he steps back with his chest puffed out in pride. "Computer," he says aloud, "run program Hallmark Main Street."

I watch in amazement as the white walls around us disappear, replaced by the Main Street of a picturesque New England-type town all decked out for Christmas. Shop windows are brightly lit, and people walk the streets in their coordinated winter gear with smiles and hot beverages in their hands.

"What is this?" I can't repress the wonder in my voice.

Khephren's answering smile is adorably shy. "It's a little something I concocted on my own. A backdrop akin to the ones I've seen in many a Hallmark Christmas movie." He glances around and sighs contentedly. "They always seem so peaceful, festive, and happy. It just makes my tentacles tingle with joy."

As amazing as the simulated environment he's created is, I find I can't keep my eyes off him and the glow of pure happiness on his face.

Khephren intrigues me. There's an air of perennial enthusiasm and hope to him that should irritate me. People like him usually do. They remind me of how stupid I was when I used to be optimistic, and I usually want to smack them with the harshness of reality to knock them down a peg or two.

But whenever I look at Khephren, I feel an oddly protective urge. Some part of me wants to preserve the purity

of his hopes and the innocence of his dreams. The universe hasn't crushed him yet, and I strangely don't want it to either.

Oblivious to my thoughts, Khephren extends an elbow in a cute and courtly manner. "Shall we take a stroll?"

Fucking hell. My heart did *not* just flutter.

When I step toward him, we enter the street, and I gasp as our outfits change within the simulation. I find I'm wearing a rather hideous Christmas sweater and jeans, a bulky scarf wrapped around my neck. Meanwhile, Khephren is also in jeans, and his oversized parka hides his tentacles. A knit beanie on his head covers the top of his long, magenta hair.

The grin he sends my way is giddy and full of unabashed glee, and I can't help but return a soft smile of my own.

I've had people call me cold before, yet Khephren seems to melt something inside me every time he looks at me.

When I link my arm with his, another shiver of awareness races through my body. It's time to accept facts. Even though it's utterly ridiculous and damn near inconceivable, I'm seriously attracted to this sweet, pink-tentacled, computer-programming, Christmas-obsessed nerd.

And I don't know what to do about it.

After all, there's the slightly awkward fact that he did abduct me against my will. But I'm mostly over that already.

I decide to shove away such pesky thoughts and just enjoy the simulation.

We stroll down Main Street, window shopping and passing others doing the same. When we get to the end of the sidewalk, Khephren looks down at his feet and shuffles awkwardly. I'm starting to recognize this as one of his adorkable responses when he's embarrassed.

"So, uh, that's all I have so far for this simulation. I'm very good at programming, but I must admit I lack the creative skill to write immersive scenarios on my own. Storytelling isn't one of my talents."

His words are stronger than a cattle prod sending volts of electricity through my body. Instantly, I'm more awake and more energized than I have been in ages.

I've never believed in destiny.

Until now.

"This is too fucking perfect," I whisper.

Khephren looks up, startled. "What do you mean?"

I put my hands on my hips and give him my best shit-eating grin. "Your ARSE is the perfect place to make a film! You provide the setting and I'll write the story. Talk about a match made in heaven."

Khephren's eyes go wide. "You could make a movie here?"

I nod so hard I hear my neck make a worrying popping noise. "Shit, yeah. I even have my camera and laptop in my backpack." Hot damn! My paranoia is finally going to pay off!

Seriously, I'm starting to think getting abducted by aliens was the best thing that could have happened to me.

An enormous grin spreads across Khephren's handsome face and his tentacles do a full-on Kermit flail in the air.

Motherfucking kryptonite. He's killing me with his cuteness and doesn't even seem to notice.

"How wonderful! I would love to help you make a film in my ARSE."

I surprise both of us when I take a flying leap and wrap my arms and legs around him in a good imitation of those tentacles of his. "You read my mind, Tentacle Boy."

My cock perks up when a couple of Khephren's tentacles automatically wrap themselves under my thighs to hold me in place.

He flushes. "I did?"

"One hundred percent. In fact, I think this will help us overcome one of our biggest hurdles."

“What do you mean?”

Reluctantly, I let go and return to my feet, then look up into his startled eyes. I’m happy to see that Khephren is equally reluctant to let go of me. “I know you took me from Earth and want me to help you experience Christmas. Well, I’m willing to do that in exchange for you helping me film something in here. That way, this becomes more of a mutually beneficial arrangement and equalizes the power imbalance in our dynamic.”

Khephren considers my suggestion. “This would make you feel more comfortable with us?” He doesn’t even try to hide the hopeful note in his voice.

“Absolutely.” I reach out my hand. “Let’s shake on it.”

He cocks his head. “But we already shook hands when we met.”

I chuckle. “A handshake can be used for more than just a greeting. It’s often an informal way of confirming an agreement between two parties. They shake on it to seal the deal.”

Khephren beams at me. “Then I shall do as humans do.” He reaches out a hand and a tentacle at the same time, shaking my hand with both just like last time.

I like it way too much.

“We have an agreement then,” I say, swallowing thickly.

“We do, indeed.”

The air around us becomes dense with awareness as our handshake lasts far longer than necessary while we stare into each other’s eyes.

He licks his lips.

“Kheph—” I start to say.

“Kheph, get your ass back to the main bridge!” Luna’s voice screeches over the ARSE holodeck’s intercom.

Khephren lets go of me and scurries over to the panel on the wall, pressing a button to respond. “What’s going on,

Luna?”

“Your parents are hailing us on the long-distance com. Evidently, they found someone who could hack us and get through.”

“You must deal with this now,” Najar’s stern voice adds.

“On my way,” Khephren growls.

He turns to me with a grimace. “I have to handle this. Do you want to stay here or join me?”

As much as I’d love to stay and play around with this new toy, I can’t exactly do any of the programming. Besides, I don’t want to miss this confrontation between Khephren and his parents.

If they turn out to be dicks, I’m ready to protect him. I won’t let anyone dull Khephren’s shine, including his family.



Chapter Seven

Privately Relayed Intergalactic Communication and Knowledge System (PRICKS)

Stardate: 47634.47

DataMaster: Is it normal to have sex dreams about someone you've invited on an intergalactic Christmas adventure? Just curious.

EatMyCometDust: LMFAO! Called it! You're totally into this human.

DrWhoDaFuck: The rom-coms never lie, my friend! Your runaway groom routine led you to the person you're meant to fall in love with. *sigh* How romantic.

DataMaster: Uh...I don't know that a sex dream means love...at least not yet. *blushing tentacle emoji*

EatMyCometDust: Lust is always a good start! If you've got sexual chemistry it can lead to other things like FEELINGS. *winky emoji*

NebulaNerd: What kind of cosmic crack are you smoking? Getting involved with someone you ABDUCTED is a BAD idea.

DataMaster: What do you mean?

NebulaNerd: @DataMaster do you seriously think this human could say no to anything you asked of them? You're their one-way ticket home. They'll do anything you want whether they wish to or not.

EatMyCometDust: @NebulaNerd makes a fair point. The power imbalance is an issue you can't ignore. Not sure how to get around that.

DataMaster: But I like him so much. *sad tentacle emoji* I guess I can't make a move on him.

DrWhoDaFuck: Sure you can! Just don't be pushy. Why don't you try courting him in a more gentlemanly fashion? That's more your style anyway. Think Jane Austen. Mr. Darcy. Captain Wentworth. Mr. Knightly. Colonel Brandon. *heart eyes* See if you can woo this human's mind and heart. Worry about sex later.

DataMaster: Hmm. Clearly I have a lot to think about. Thanks, friends!

KHEPHREN

I stride onto the main bridge, shoulders thrown back and head held high. I will *not* cower in front of my parents.

Even if I did run away from them and the fiancé they arranged for me.

Sasha scurries after me, his eyes gleaming with obvious interest.

Luna is wringing her green tentacles, a worried frown on her face. "What are you going to tell them?"

I grimace. "I don't know. I'm planning to wing it."

Najar snorts. "Good luck with that."

My tentacles squirm around me as my own anxiety rises. "Well, I don't have time to plan something better. I've put them off long enough. If they've gone to the extent of hiring someone to hack our signal then I need to 'face the music,' as the Earthlings like to say."

Sasha gives me a surprisingly serious look. "You can do this. Your crew and I have your back. If your parents end up being asshats, we'll stand by you."

I blink at him in surprise and can't hold back an immediate smile. His simple words of support boost my spirits and my

self-confidence.

I stand at attention in front of the viewscreen and give Najar a nod. He returns it, his expression stoic as always, but I detect a glimmer of concern in his eyes.

My mother and father appear larger than life on the screen.

Here we go.

“Khephren Delgado Thrase!” my mother shrieks. “Do you have any idea how worried your father and I have been about you?” She holds a delicate lace handkerchief up to her eyes and wipes away tears. “We had no idea where you went or if you were even all right.” She stifles a sob. “You could have been hurt—or worse!”

My father places a reassuring hand on her shoulder. “Now, now, dear.” He turns his attention back to me with a scowl. “What do you have to say for yourself, son? You’ve had your mother and me worried sick.”

Mom snuffles and nods in agreement.

I swallow but stand my ground. “You both know I didn’t want to marry Borlan Kuretti. I told you many times that I objected to the union, but you wouldn’t hear reason. You forced my hand.”

My mother straightens her shoulders. “Colonel Kuretti is a perfectly respectable man who you have utterly humiliated with your antics. He wouldn’t have you now even if you were to return this instant and grovel at his feet!”

I cross my arms defiantly. “Good. I wouldn’t have him either. You were the ones who wanted this union. Sometimes I think you just wanted to shuffle me off into marriage so you wouldn’t have to deal with me anymore.”

My mother gasps in shock. “That’s not the way of things *at all*.”

I arch an eyebrow. “Then why were you so insistent, even when I told you many times that I had no desire to marry some boring warrior who only cares about training and never wants

to travel with me and explore the vast, majestic reaches of our universe?”

My father sighs long and loud. “I acknowledge that we were perhaps too forceful in our desire to see you safely wed, but you know that our people face many threats on a regular basis. You need a partner who can protect you and keep you safe. The longer you wait, the harder it will be for you to find one.”

It’s my turn to sigh with equal irritation. “Dad, that is such an old-fashioned and outdated notion. Besides, I don’t intend to spend the rest of my life on our home world. I’ve always wanted to live my life among the stars. There are so many worlds and galaxies to visit. I have no interest in staying on Draveth.”

My mother’s lip trembles, and one of her tentacles touches the screen as if trying to caress my face. “Do you plan to never see us again?”

Seeing her upset is hard to take, and my tentacles fly up in exasperation. “Of course not! I’ll come to visit, and we have the intergalactic communication relay system. We can always talk this way.”

“That’s not the same as seeing my baby in person.” My mother’s working the guilt factor hard right now. I don’t like hurting them but I have to stay strong.

I keep my tone even. “I know that, Mom. But I’m an adult now and I have to live my own life. I’m not abandoning you or planning to stay away forever. I love you both very much, and I promise I will visit, but I want to carve my own path through the universe.”

My father rubs his forehead. “As you know, I’ve never understood this odd desire of yours. I can’t say that I don’t have grave concerns but I take some comfort in knowing Najar is with you to make you see reason when necessary.” He gives me a faint smile. “You’re an adult now and we need to let you make your own decisions.”

My hearts warm with hope. “I promise I will make you proud. All I want is for you both to accept that, and me, as I am.”

My father’s expression softens. “We love you even if we don’t always understand you. I’m sorry our good intentions made you feel you needed to escape in the way you did.” His lips quirk. “I will admit though, I was impressed with your ability to refurbish your very own ship without any of us knowing, and then to be able to plan such a brilliant exit strategy.” His eyes gleam with fatherly pride. “If you had been born with the warrior’s mark, you would have made a brilliant military strategist.”

I bask in his unexpected praise. “Thank you. I prefer to use my talents toward computer programming. There’s something very special I’m working on while I’m traveling the universe. Something I hope will make me famous and quite wealthy.”

My father nods. “I would expect nothing less from such a brilliant child of mine.”

“Hopefully the lengths to which I was willing to go gives you both a clearer understanding of just how serious I am about what I want.”

I glance at my mother, who appears to have calmed down and has the first hint of a genuine smile on her face. “It does, and we are proud of you, but your father and I are still concerned about your safety.” She shakes her head. “You are still young and far too naive in your idealistic views of others. Just as there are dangers here on the home world, there are plenty that abound in the universe. Your father and I would feel so much better if we knew that you had a suitable protector.”

My tentacles coil tightly behind me. “I’m taking appropriate precautions and I have Najjar here to talk sense and reason into me whenever I need it, as Dad suggested. Luna can fix any problem our ship might encounter. She’s the greatest engineer of our generation and will keep us sailing safely through the stars.”

Luna's face glows as she regards me with an enormous grin.

"At least Najar was kind enough to go with you," my mother says. "He's always been very devoted to you and has the warrior's mark." She frowns. "You're sure you two have no interest in one another?"

Najar gives me a panicked look that I reciprocate. "Mom! You know he and I have always felt like brothers. We've never had romantic inclinations toward one another." I shudder. "That would be far too bizarre and majorly icky."

Najar solemnly nods and shudders.

"Look, Luna, Najar, and I want something different for our lives. We want to explore a path that doesn't involve getting married and settling down in the traditional ways of our people."

My father considers this for a moment. "In the ways of our people? Does that mean you are willing to get married, just not to a Dravethian?"

I freeze, sensing danger ahead. "Uh...maybe?"

He brightens. "Wonderful! I have diplomatic ties with a number of different species. I'm sure I could put out feelers to see if there are any eligible candidates among my acquaintances."

My mother voices her enthusiastic agreement as my panic begins to rise. Despite everything I've been telling them, my parents are clearly not letting go of this matchmaking impulse they seem to have. I dart a frantic glance between Najar and Luna, who look equally worried, but then my eyes settle on Sasha standing out of view.

That's when a truly foolish idea enters my head and won't let go. After all, it just might be off the wall enough to work.

I gesture a tentacle to Sasha and mouth, "Come here."

His eyes bulge as he glances at my parents on the screen and then back at me. "Are you fucking nuts?" He mouths back.

I grin, liking my idea more and more. “Just come here and play along.”

He narrows his eyes at me, but steps into view of the screen. My parents, who have been chattering away about their various contacts and potential eligible marriage candidates, come to an eerily silent halt the moment they lay their eyes on Sasha.

Okay. I’ve got to make this look good.

With a confident grin, I pull Sasha’s stiff body into my side and wrap an arm— and a tentacle, for good measure—around him.

He pinches my side in retaliation, but I manage not to flinch, and he marginally relaxes into my impromptu embrace.

“There’s no need to find marriage candidates for me. I’ve already found my own.” I swallow, my hearts pounding in my chest, and pray to all the galactic gods that Sasha will go along with me here. “Mom, Dad, I know this is sudden and unexpected, but this is my fiancé, Sasha Vasiliev.”

My *fiancé* lets out a gurgling noise that doesn’t bode well. It’s followed by a long, awkward silence before he forces a slightly scary smile on his face and gives an awkward wave to my parents. “Hi, there. Nice to meet you. I’m Khephren’s... fiancé.” He pauses. “Surprise!”

We’re met with shocked stares from my parents.

For once in my life, I have surprised them so much that they can’t speak!

“You wish to wed...a human?” my dad finally asks after several uncomfortable beats of silence.

I nod my head and wave all my tentacles in the affirmative.

My dad’s eyes narrow as he regards me. “Where in the universe did you meet him? We’re not allowed to visit Earth, and the Earthlings have not yet developed the technology to travel to the far reaches of space. Their spacecrafts still remain vastly inferior to those of other species in the universe.”

I squirm awkwardly, feeling my tentacles sweat. “It doesn’t matter how we met. All that matters is that we’re in love and we’re going to get married.” I turn desperately to Sasha. “Isn’t that right, darling?”

He gives me another forced smile. “Absolutely, snookums,” he grits out between clenched teeth before turning back to my parents.

My father groans. “Khephren, what foolishness is this? A human cannot protect you.” He looks Sasha up and down. “This one is decidedly lacking in height and musculature. He is no warrior.”

Sasha puts his hands on his hips and glares at my father. “Fuck you, pal. I may be small but I’m scrappy. And I fight dirty.” He gives a little snarl that turns me on like nothing else. “Anytime you want to bring it, I’ll kick your ass six ways to Sunday and tie all your tentacles into knots while I’m at it.”

My cock starts to harden even though this is definitely a “wrong place, wrong time” moment.

Luna begins to howl with laughter, and I even see Najar’s mouth quirk with amusement.

I can’t help but stare at this feisty little human, knowing I probably have a stupidly smitten look on my face at the moment. Even though he’s only my temporary fake fiancé to buy me some time and get my parents to stop with their matchmaking plans, I’m drawn to him like no other being in this whole universe. I can’t help but feel touched that he would defy my father and speak up for himself and for me. Sasha may not be a warrior by my people’s definition, but he’s fiery and fierce.

I find it way too sexy—distractingly so, even.

Far from being angry, my father seems intrigued. “You are serious about my son?”

Sasha juts his chin out. “So what if I am? He and I are both adults and we can make our own decisions about who we want to be with.” He gives me a nod and my tentacles wave happily in the air.

“But—” my father begins, only to stop and stare once again.

Because, at that precise moment, Jonesy slinks into the room and prowls over to Sasha with lithe grace before demanding to be picked up. He leans down and pulls the majestic creature into his arms, where she sits regally, her gold eyes assessing the screen in front of her as if surveying an audience of worshippers.

My parents gasp in unison.

“It is the divine messenger of Thekmis,” my mother whispers in awe.

“A truly fortuitous sign,” my father concurs, unable to take his eyes off the feline in Sasha’s arms.

Jonesy yawns, her mouth opening wide to reveal her fangs, before she begins licking her dainty paw as if completely unconcerned by the rapt attention of her audience. A queen through and through, she acts as if it is merely her due.

I puff out my chest. “See, I have chosen well. Sasha’s connection to this divine creature brings good fortune to me and my ship.”

My father’s eyes gleam with interest. “This is a most unexpected but promising turn of events.” He strokes his chin thoughtfully and nods his head. “We should plan the wedding soon.”

Dark matter and damn it. I should have known he’d go there.

Sasha stiffens at my side, and I hurry to redirect the conversation. “Dad, there’s no rush. Right now, Sasha and I and the rest of our crew are planning to enjoy some of our space travels. We want to find our own yellow brick road among the stars!”

Rambo takes that moment to chime in. “Roads? Where we’re going, we don’t need roads.”

Sasha makes a muffled snort and mutters, “I fucking love Rambo.”

I clear my throat, trying to get us back on track. “We’ll get married when we’re ready. There’s no rush. We’re both young and having fun. At the moment, Sasha is helping me prepare for my very first authentic Christmas on my ship.”

My mother blinks, waving a curious pale blue tentacle in the air. “Christmas? That human holiday you’re always going on about?”

I feel my cheeks flush. “Yes. I’ve become quite enamored of it.”

Luna snorts. “That’s putting it mildly.”

I shoot her an evil glare. “You love it too, don’t lie.”

She grins and shrugs.

“This is because of all of those human movies you downloaded from the intergalactic web, isn’t it?” Dad punctuates that question with a knowing look and a long-suffering sigh.

And here I thought I’d covered my tracks.

“You knew about that?” Hopefully, they didn’t know about my porn downloads over the years. There’s a lot of unusual stuff out there in the universe, and I was a curious teenager. That’s my story and I’m sticking to it.

He scoffs. “Of course. Your mother and I aren’t fools. Well, perhaps we were since we were too lenient in ignoring your unusual proclivities.”

I can’t help but fume a little. “Don’t diss the things I love. Those movies bring me a great deal of joy, and I think it’s stupid that our people are not allowed to watch them. You know I’ve always felt this way.”

My father grumbles. “Indeed, we may have indulged you a little too much as a child.”

I roll my eyes. “Whatever. I’m a computer programmer. If you thought I wasn’t going to be able to access stuff on the intergalactic web then you’re dreaming.”

Najar coughs. “Ahem. I think we are getting sidetracked here.”

I shoot him a grateful look before returning my focus to my parents. “Najar is right. I appreciate your concern, and while I know you’re probably angry with me right now, I hope you will come to understand why I did what I did. My aim was not to hurt you, but I had to be true to myself.”

To my surprise, Sasha takes hold of my free hand and squeezes it.

“We will always love you, Khephren.” My mother’s smile is sad. “I’m sorry we pushed you too hard. Our love and concern for you can be a bit—”

“Overbearing?” I offer helpfully.

She narrows her eyes in warning. “Overzealous would be my choice of wording. But I see now that we backed you into a corner you didn’t want to be in with Colonel Kuretti.” She brushes back her blue hair and flicks her tentacles in the air. “How was I to know you’d found love with a human? And one favored by Thekmis! Just wait until I tell all my friends. Don’t leave me waiting too long. I expect you two to set a date very soon.”

Sasha tenses next to me. Sensing the need to get them off this communication as soon as possible, I wave several tentacles in the universal signal of goodbye. “Gotta run, Mom and Dad! We have places to be and Christmas celebrations to plan. Love you!”

Before they can respond, I cut the communication and let out a long, shaky breath.

Sasha pulls out of my embrace, much to my regret, and rounds on me, his gray eyes full of fire. “Fiancé? What the ever-loving *fuck* was that about, Tentacle Boy?”

I hold up both hands and several tentacles in a placating gesture. “Sorry! It was the first thing I could think of to divert them from trying to betroth me to someone else.”

He sets down Jonesy, who wanders off again as if knowing her time in front of the camera is over. “Great. So now they

think I'm your husband-to-be. How are we going to get out of this mess? They were ready to set a date the moment you told them."

I can't hold back a wince. "As my mother suggested, they tend to be a little...*overzealous*."

Sasha crosses his arms and frowns. "Well, they do seem to love you a lot, even if their actions are a bit misguided when it comes to your love life."

"They really do care," Luna pipes up. "Kheph's folks are good people, if a bit stubborn." She grins. "You'll learn that Kheph comes by that trait genetically."

"What are they going to do when you have to end our fake engagement?" Sasha pales. "Please tell me they aren't going to come after me."

I step closer, immediately alarmed by the direction of his thoughts. "No! Of course not. You will carry none of the blame. I will happily play the role of bad guy. I'll tell them I just couldn't commit to you and sent you home with a broken heart. They'll have only me to scold. Promise."

"I don't like lying." Sasha sighs. "But I do admit their singular focus on marrying you off is quite evident—and unrelenting. I'll go along with this for now, but you need to find a way to get your parents to back off for good that doesn't involve waking up married on Saturn."

The reference confuses me but my tentacles coil with pleasure and relief. "Thank you, Sasha. I know I've asked a lot of you. What more can I give you in return? Ask and it's yours."

Sasha's expression turns thoughtful and then calculating. "Well, you've already promised I can film something in your holodeck..."

"Augmented Reality Simulation Environment," I counter.

"Yes, I'll film something in your ARSE," he says with a smirk.

I feel my cock throb and my balls tingle at his words.

Luna begins to cackle with glee. “Galactic gods! That’s priceless.” She steps forward and gives Sasha a high tentacle. “I like you, human.”

Sasha smirks as he smacks his hand against her proffered appendage. “Hold on to that thought.” He turns to me. “In exchange for being your fake fiancé, I want you and each of your crew members to play a role in whatever production I create.”

Luna’s laughter cuts off instantly. “Say what now?”

Najar shakes his head. “I knew abducting a human was a bad idea.”

Sasha holds out his hand. “Deal?”

I reach out a hand and tentacle again to shake. “Deal.”

My friends groan loudly, no doubt wondering what I’ve gotten them caught up in now. Even I don’t know. But I find the idea of working on a film project with Sasha to be utterly stimulating!



Chapter Eight

Welcome to outer space! Is this your first cosmic voyage? Are you new to the mystery and wonder that is our universe? This helpful guide aims to provide resources, and reassurances, as you navigate this new experience. Whether you're on a short vacation to the purple beaches of Rialto X or spacepub-crawling through the Gamma Dionysus Quadrant, this guide will prepare you for what lies ahead. The cosmos is a beautiful and awe-inspiring place, but it's also full of just as many dangers as marvels. From unexpected asteroids to marauding space pirates, you have to be careful as you explore from one galaxy to the next. This guide will provide tips on how to stay safe and let you know what sights you don't want to miss, and what you should skip.

—The Lonely Universe Guide to Space Travel for Beginners

SASHA

It isn't every day that one gets abducted by aliens—and then becomes the fake fiancé of one of said aliens.

You better bet I'm making a sweet deal for myself out of that one. Already an idea for a new project is percolating in my brain and I can't wait to work on it.

When Khephren walks me back to my suite—like an old-fashioned tentacled gentleman—he hesitates, shuffling from one foot to the other.

“Everything okay, Tentacle Boy?” I ask.

He blushes again, and damn if I don't find it more and more attractive.

You should not be perving on your alien abductor!

“Since we’re, uh, fake fiancés, I was wondering if you... That is... Would you like to have dinner with me tonight?”

Fuck. This man—I mean, alien—is too damn adorable. He’s melting the ice around my cold, dead heart without even trying.

I need to be careful. Khephren could pose a threat to my carefully cultivated indifference when it comes to love. After all, I’ve learned the hard way that when the going gets tough, most people don’t actually care as much as they profess to. They disappear faster than the money in my bank account.

I cross my arms, feeling a tad suspicious. “That sounds like a date. We don’t need to put on a show about this whole fake engagement thing, especially when your parents aren’t here.”

Khephren’s bottom lip trembles and he directs the biggest, most pathetic puppy-dog eyes at me full blast.

He’s either a master manipulator or the kind of alien who wears his heart on his sleeve.

It’s the latter. I know it. Who could stay cold and unfeeling against a cuteness attack like that?

“I just thought it would be nice to get to know you better,” he hastens to add before I respond. “In case my parents call again and want to grill us on how well we know one another. I wouldn’t put it past them.”

I wouldn’t either. His parents have only one thing on their mind—marrying off their son.

Khephren’s tentacles reach out tentatively, doing a gentle pink wave, and he has such a hopeful look on his face that I find I just can’t say no, even though the logical side of my brain is telling me not to get in deeper with this man. Er, alien. “Dinner sounds nice.”

Shit! What is happening to me? Why am I such a fucking sucker for Tentacle Boy?

Khephren's answering smile is blindingly bright and makes my heart flutter wildly in my chest. "Wonderful! I have some things to work on in the Augmented Reality Simulation Environment, but I can pick you up here at dinnertime. The interactive screen in your room will alert you a half hour beforehand. Otherwise, if you're exploring the ship, I'll come find you."

I feign nonchalance. "Got it. I'm going to do some work as well. On my story idea for filming." That's true at least.

His features shine with excitement. "I can't wait to hear all about it." Then he gives me a strangely formal bow, turns, and disappears down the hallway.

Entering my room, I let out a shaky breath. Khephren's effect on me is bizarre. Well, to be honest, even though he's a big pink alien with tentacles, he's seriously hot.

I've started to notice that his tentacles have a bit of a mind of their own. They seek me out whenever he gets close, and several of them have touched me already. I probably should be scared or creeped out by it. Instead, I've found it oddly arousing. His tentacles are soft and smooth, but also warm and gentle. Their caress is downright...*nice*. A few times I've found myself wishing they hadn't stopped touching me.

Maybe this alien abduction situation was a much-needed wakeup call about the sad state of my sex life. The truth is, I haven't gotten laid in months. A hand job in a club bathroom nearly six months ago was the last time I was intimate with anyone, and it's been a few years since I've had a relationship.

After my last breakup, I decided casual hookups were so much easier than stupid fucking feelings. People abandon me. That's just the truth of things. And I was tired of it. So, I vowed to leave love for other suckers.

But lately, even hookups aren't as enjoyable anymore. Sure, sex without feelings can be plenty of fun sometimes. Recently though, it's all started to feel dissatisfying and not worth it. While I enjoy myself during the act, afterward, when we go our separate ways, I feel this empty, hollow ache inside me that gets worse each time.

I know my parents disowning me has fucked with me in every way imaginable. But no matter who I meet, I can't shake the lingering desire to protect myself from being tossed aside yet again. My heart is too fragile to go through any more rejection.

As one therapist I saw tried to tell me early on, it's led to a rather solitary and lonely existence.

Maybe that's why being abducted by this odd little trio—or quartet if you include Rambo—hasn't bothered me as much as it should. It's actually rather nice to be with folks who want me around. Even if they are aliens.

Khephren is especially compelling. There's something almost childlike in his earnest innocence and enthusiasm. His fascination with Christmas is weird but also kind of adorable.

The fact that he loves cheesy Hallmark movies is deplorable, but no one's perfect.

I spend much of the rest of the day—although it doesn't really feel like day since it's perpetually dark in the universe—working on my film project.

Given that I don't know how long I'll be on this ship, I've decided that something shorter and perhaps more serialized in nature would likely work better. Most film productions, even small, low-budget ones, require more than a few weeks to get off the ground. And I'm only just starting planning for pre-production right now.

Besides, I've had good luck with my little photo vignettes on Instagram featuring Jonesy. I'll just parlay some of that smaller-scale experience into my new project moving forward.

By the time dinner rolls around and I get the notification from my room's wall monitor, my face hurts from grinning so much. I've had far too much fun drafting what might possibly be my most ridiculous but amazing idea ever.

I close my laptop and stretch. Although the ship does not have a typical electrical outlet for powering my tech, Khephren did provide me with a wonderfully compact device

that I just set next to my laptop, and it keeps the computer fully charged.

Believe me, the advanced technology they're working with is a bit beyond me in terms of being able to understand how it all works. But I'm not complaining. I have to admit, a lot of it's pretty damn convenient.

After brushing my teeth with the alien version of toothpaste—a powder that foams in my mouth—I'm oddly excited as I begin to dress for my date with Khephren.

It's not a real date, I scold myself. He just wants to cover all his bases in case his parents decide to harass him again. Khephren's only doing this to make our fake engagement seem more real if necessary. Even though I get that, I'm looking forward to talking with him and spending time together.

In the short time I've been aboard this ship, Khephren and his friends have shown me more kindness than I've received from anyone in years. Living in LA has many benefits, but my life there has been pretty lonely over the last six years. After graduation it seemed like my friends in college and I all went in different directions, and most of us didn't keep in touch. Those who stayed local got invested in long-term relationships and new jobs, putting old friends on the back burner. I suppose it's a normal consequence of becoming an adult and going out on your own in the world, but my post-graduation trajectory has been very solo and lonesome.

When Khephren said he wanted to be friends, I actually felt a little spark of excitement in my heart. I honestly hope we will.

Of course, the more rational side of my mind tells me that's a foolish plan. This trio of tentacled aliens are going to take me home in a couple of weeks and then I'll never see them again. They'll be off gallivanting about the universe, having all kinds of fun and adventures, and I'll be back in my dingy little apartment, barely scraping by with jobs I don't enjoy and watching my dreams do their final pathetic circle down the drain.

I brush aside those painful thoughts and decide to focus on the here and now. If nothing else, I'm determined to learn as much as possible about Khephren and his people so that I can potentially turn all this into a story idea for a film down the line.

As I start changing for my date, I realize I have a bit of a problem.

The garments that the machine made for me are serviceable but a bit plain, even for me. I do tend to favor darker colors, but I also like something with a bit of style at least. These clothes are...starkly utilitarian.

This is not a real date, I remind myself for the umpteenth time. It doesn't matter how you look. You and Khephren are just going to be friends. There's no need to try to impress him.

Being unable to do much about my drab attire, I finger comb my hair in the bathroom mirror. It remains short and unintentionally messy, but it's always been like that, and I don't have a hope in hell of taming it into submission without any styling product here.

But that doesn't matter because this is *not* a real date.

Yup. Gonna keep repeating that until my brain, and my dick, get the message.

I firmly nod at myself in the mirror just as I hear a familiar knock that sends my foolish heart racing with anticipation.

Hurrying over to the door, I open it to find Khephren on the other side, a sweet, slightly shy smile on his handsome face and those pink tentacles waving hopefully around him.

They're really starting to grow on me. Sure, I was majorly freaked out by them at first. It's not every day you encounter something that is largely confined to the realms of the aquatic deep on Earth. But his tentacles are not like those of a squid or other creature. They have no suckers, at least as far as I can tell. They're strangely smooth and soft, and rather graceful and surprisingly expressive in their movements.

Khephren appears to have changed for our date and is wearing a very flattering, tight-fitting purple vest over a short-

sleeved shirt in a silver color that complements his pink skin.

I'm still not sure how the Dravethians design clothes to work around the tentacles coming out of their backs, but I plan to ask him at some point soon. I've got to work my way up to it.

"You look very nice," I blurt out without thinking.

And it's true. He does.

His long, magenta hair flows over his shoulders and down his chest in glossy waves. It's similar to human hair but seems to move on its own, almost more like his tentacles. I'm itching to touch it but don't want to take liberties I haven't been granted.

I've never been particularly drawn to men with long hair but there's something about Khephren's that is mesmerizing, much like his stunning, multicolored eyes.

Glancing down at myself, I cringe. "Sorry I couldn't dress up more. I'm afraid the machine that made my garments doesn't seem to have a whole lot of stylistic variation when it comes to clothing."

Khephren's eyes widen in realization. "My apologies. The generator is indeed limited in some of its capabilities." He frowns. "Are you unhappy with your clothing?"

I raise both hands in a placating gesture. "No, they're fine." And they're free, which I'm not about to sneeze at. "I just don't have anything quite as fancy or colorful to wear as you do."

Khephren's eyes go distant in thought, then he smiles. "We shall have to remedy that. But for now, come. Let's go and enjoy our evening meal."

He holds out his hand and a tentacle to me.

Without even thinking, I reach out and both his appendages take hold of mine as he leads me down the ship corridor. His touch is gentle and pleasingly warm. It sends an electric zing racing through my body that I can't ignore.

Fucking hell. Tentacle Boy has got it going on. Add to that the fact that he's quite possibly the sweetest man I've ever met and I can hear the alarm signals in my brain going off every time I look at him—but I don't fucking care.

I glance up at Khephren and he smiles down at me, his endlessly cheerful countenance full of joy and delight.

The sight produces a twinge in my chest, and all I want is to protect that side of him.

We come to a door I haven't been to before and I arch a questioning eyebrow at my not-date-fake-fiancé.

I'm further intrigued when his face flushes deep pink.

He clears his throat nervously. "Uh...I took the liberty of preparing our meal in my quarters. I thought it would be nice for us to have some extra privacy. I hope you don't mind."

I grin. "Not at all." Hot damn, now I want to see what his room is like!

He opens the door and ushers me inside. His quarters are similar to my own, just considerably larger, but what instantly draws my eye is one entire wall that is quite possibly, I suspect, the largest home theater screen I have ever seen.

I can't help it. I have to ask. "Are you trying to seduce me with your enormous...screen?"

Khephren sputters and his tentacles fly all over the place. "No! I told you, I am a most ardent lover of movies. When I refurbished the ship, I made sure to include a suitable screen in here." He smiles bashfully. "We also have a small theater with an even bigger screen in another part of the ship."

Fuck yeah. Talk dirty to me, Tentacle Boy!

"Your own theater?" I whisper, trying not to moan like a porn star. This guy has a holodeck that can create any movie set of my dreams *and* a private theater?

I'm getting a semi just thinking about it. "Okay, I'm definitely going to have to see that at some point."

Khephren nods enthusiastically. “Of course.” He ushers me over to a small table set with covered dishes and nestled in front of the panoramic window looking out into the universe. My traitorous heart flutters like I’m a Jane Austen heroine.

What the hell?

This is not a real date, I remind myself yet again, the voice in my head almost desperate now because this is the most romantic thing anyone has ever done for me before.

I’m shocked to feel tears pricking my eyes and I hastily blink them away.

Get a grip! This isn’t like you.

Fortunately, Khephren doesn’t seem to notice. He merely pulls out my chair for me and I sit, taking it all in.

He uncovers the dishes with a flourish, and I inhale the lingering scent of something spicy.

“What is this?” I ask him.

Khephren beams. “I wanted to introduce you to some of the foods from my home world.”

He sits across from me but to my surprise reaches out and takes hold of my hand, a serious expression on his face. “Do not fear, I have extensively researched all the ingredients to ensure they are safe for human consumption.”

Fucking hell.

It’s such a small gesture but it’s one that I’m seriously touched by. Enough that it makes my stupid heart flutter.

Again.

I clear my throat awkwardly. “Thank you, I appreciate that. It smells wonderful.”

He nods. “The food of my home world appears to be quite similar to cuisines from parts of Southeast Asia on Earth. We enjoy a wide variety of spices. I have tried to ensure the heat level is not too intense in case you aren’t used to that.”

Damn this man—I mean alien—and his thoughtfulness! It's making me have feelings I haven't had in far longer than I care to remember.

Khephren lifts a utensil reminiscent of a spork and gestures at me to do the same.

I take a spoonful of the brightly colored food in my bowl and tentatively taste it.

The explosion of flavor on my tongue has me moaning with pleasure. Although the food is an unusual yellow hue, and I couldn't tell you what meat or vegetables it contains, it's reminiscent of a cross between an Indian and a Thai curry.

“Oh my god, this is amazing,” I manage to say around another mouthful. “I love curry.”

Khephren's eyes brighten. “I'm delighted that you like it. Human curry does seem to be a closely analogous food that is similar to my people's.”

As we enjoy our meal, I find we slip into comfortable conversation with ease. It's kind of ironic that a fake one is going far better than any real date I've been on in years—and it's with an alien, to boot.

We make small talk for a little while, discussing some of our interests, and I already mentally make a note of films I need to introduce him to so I can expand his sorely lacking repertoire.

Perhaps we can even watch them in that amazing theater he talked about... but I don't want to get ahead of myself.

We're both sipping a nice herbal tea after our meal when Khephren tilts his head and studies me. I'm unexpectedly self-conscious under his scrutiny.

“What?” I hate the defensive note in my voice.

“I know it's a delicate subject, but I was hoping you would explain why you no longer enjoy Christmas. In all the movies I've seen, it appears to be a most joyous holiday, a time of celebration and love. If you don't wish to talk about it, I won't

force your confidence. I merely hope to get a better understanding.”

There isn't a trace of anything other than genuine concern on Khephren's open face and I think that's why I decide to tell him the truth.

I set down my tea and look out the window at the marvelous view, one that no other human has ever seen before. As far as I can tell, we are light-years beyond where humans have ever been able to travel in space. I feel like I am a poor choice to receive such an honor, but I'm absorbing it all and trying to etch every single memory in my mind.

This truly is a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

I take a deep breath and turn my attention back to Khephren.

“From what you said, your planet doesn't seem to have any issues with people being attracted to those of the same sex, am I correct?”

He blinks at me. “Of course not. We have many sexualities. It is a wondrous spectrum of possibilities.”

“How do you identify?” I ask him. “Sexually, I mean.”

Khephren considers the question. “We do not have labels for such things. But, in Earthling terms, one might say that I am pansexual with a preference for masculine-presenting individuals.”

I nod. “Thank you for sharing that with me. Well, in my world, I identify as gay. I knew my sexual orientation from a fairly young age, but I grew up in a very strict, traditional Catholic household.”

He tilts his head. “Catholic? What is that?”

“A religious system of beliefs,” I explain.

He nods. “Ah yes, please continue.”

“Unfortunately, although the Catholic Church has improved on some issues over the years, there are still many religious figureheads within the church and specific branches

that are very anti-queer in their dogma. They see anything not heterosexual as a sin and claim to ‘love the sinner but hate the sin.’ It’s all a bunch of hypocritical bullshit.”

Khephren frowns. “That is pure nonsense. Surely scientific knowledge has debunked such sentiment. Sexuality is not a sin.”

I shake my head sadly. “Unfortunately, it hasn’t. I was careful to never speak my truth to my family because I sensed they wouldn’t accept it.”

Khephren’s frown deepens and I soldier on. “When I went away to college, it was my first time leaving home and being able to be myself, out and proud. I mean, I had secretly dated and hooked up with some guys back in Chicago on the down-low when I was in high school, but once I was hundreds of miles away from my family, I was able to fully embrace myself. I joined a rainbow spectrum group on campus and made lots of other LGBTQ+ friends. I developed a new sense of confidence in my identity and who I am.” I sigh, sadness descending over me as it always does when I think of what happened. “I went home for Christmas that first year and wanted to share my happiness with my family—to be who I am, once and for all. I think that I had grown naively optimistic while away. I thought they would overcome their prejudice if it were their own son coming out to them as gay. I didn’t think it would go over easily, let alone well, but I figured it could be a start to them slowly growing to accept me.” I let out a bitter laugh. “I couldn’t have been more wrong.”

“What happened?” Khephren whispers.

I close my eyes, unable to look at him as I tell the rest. “They disowned me, kicked me out of the house right then and there. Didn’t want to have anything more to do with me. Told me I was dead to them. That they wished I’d never been born. That I was a pervert. A monster. Disgusting. And that I was going to hell.” I take a shaky breath, fighting back the painful recollection of their faces twisted with horror and disgust. “There I was in the wee hours of Christmas morning, out on my ass on the street, alone in Chicago. I lost my family and

my home all in one fell swoop. They haven't spoken to me since."

I open my eyes and, to my utter shock, I see big, fat tears streaming down Khephren's face and his bottom lip is trembling. "How could they do such a thing? You cannot control who you are attracted to. It is innate to our biology. How could they abandon their child over something like this?"

I sigh. "Unfortunately, religious ideology has brainwashed many on my planet over the years. Plenty of queer people still get rejected by their families. I found out the hard way that my parents' love was conditional." I snort. "Honestly, the most genuine love I think I've known in my life has come from Jonesy. It's an unconditional love she gives without demanding anything in return."

To my horror, poor, sweet Khephren begins to sob, and my chest aches at the sight. I hurry out of my seat and pull him to his feet. Without thinking, I wrap my arms around him and pat his tentacle-covered back. "Hey, sorry. I didn't mean to upset you. It's okay."

"No, it's not! It's not okay!" He wails. "What happened to you was terrible. You're such a wonderful human being. I don't understand how your parents could cast you aside for something that has been a part of you since the day you were born." He starts to cry even harder and strangely enough, it calms me. His sorrow for what I lost acts as a healing balm that settles over that open, painful wound that has never fully healed. A knot I didn't know I had deep inside me loosens, and I feel lighter and freer than I have in years.

I rub circles on his back, brushing several of his tentacles. I don't stop my movements when I feel them reach out and encircle us both, then begin to mimic my gentle movements on my own back.

We stay like that for I don't know how long, holding each other until Khephren's sobs begin to quiet down to sniffles.

Even though my back is starting to protest, I don't want to let go. The feel of my arms around him and his tentacles around me is strangely comforting. It's warm and I feel like

we're in this cocoon of safety together, one that I want to get lost in.

I'm truly touched by his concern for me. I'm beginning to realize Khephren is a tender-hearted and highly empathic individual. His friends are kind, but not so easily emotionally affected. Najar seems far more stoic and controlled in his emotions. Luna's fun but I haven't gotten a good enough read on her yet. Khephren, however, wears his heart on his sleeve.

Correction—hearts. Pressed up against his chest, I listen and feel what I'm pretty sure are *three* hearts beating.

Reluctantly, I pull back enough to look up into his wet, red-rimmed eyes.

With slow, careful movements, I reach up and wipe away the sweet tears he shed for me.

It's something of a wonder that in this vast universe, an alien who barely knows me would mourn my loss in a way that no one on Earth ever had, including me.

“Thank you,” I tell him softly.

He snuffles. “For what?”

I feel a smile curving my lips. “For caring. For sharing your sorrow at my loss. Somehow, it helps. This is a pain I've had to carry alone for a long time. But you're the first person who's shown me true empathy, and that's a wonderful gift I'll cherish forever.”

One of his tentacles reaches up and gently wipes away a stealthy tear that has managed to fall from my eye, and I laugh softly. “As far as first dates go, even fake ones, I don't know that I've had any where we ended up crying together, but it sure is memorable.”

Khephren chuckles softly too, but then he gets a glimmer of determination in those multicolored eyes and his face glows with renewed enthusiasm. “Your family may be fools but I'm not. I understand your worth, Sasha Vasiliev, and during your time with us, I am determined to not only experience a real human Christmas, but I'm also going to make it the best Christmas you've ever had!”

I stare at him, mouth open. “Why?”

“Because I want you to find your love for the holiday once again. We will wash away the painful memories and replace them with beautiful ones. That is my promise to you.”

Somehow, I believe him. And deep within my belly, a kernel of hope starts to unfurl.



Chapter Nine

Privately Relayed Intergalactic Communication and Knowledge System (PRICKS)

Stardate: 47634.48

DataMaster: Am I being foolish, or do you think a human could possibly want to stay with me and travel the universe?

EatMyCometDust: Holy spaceshit! Are wedding bells actually in your future?!

DrWhoDaFuck: Dang! You move fast, bro!

NebulaNerd: You. Abducted. Him. No, he's not going to want to stay on your ship.

EatMyCometDust: Come on! Don't be a party pooper, @NebulaNerd! True love does exist.

NebulaNerd: I'm not saying it doesn't. Just not between an abductor and their abducted.

DataMaster: We've gotten past that. He knows he's a guest on my ship, not a prisoner.

DrWhoDaFuck: Smooth! I like it. Are you working on wooing him like we talked about?

DataMaster: Absolutely. I'm on a mission to help him regain his Christmas spirit!

NebulaNerd: Good galactic gods....

EatMyCometDust: No negative talk allowed! We're here to help, DM. You got this, man. Win over his heart and the rest will follow.

DrWhoDaFuck: I concur. Work your mojo, my friend.

DataMaster: Wish me luck! There's something about Sasha I just can't ignore. My tentacles tell me to hold on and never let him go.

KHEPHREN

After walking Sasha back to his room, I message Luna and Najar to meet me in my quarters for a strategy meeting.

Within moments, they arrive with curious looks on their faces.

"Please sit, friends," I tell them, gesturing toward my small lounge area.

We all sit around a small table and I face them with all the seriousness I can muster. "I want to help Sasha regain his Christmas spirit."

Najar groans and holds a hand over his face while Luna claps her tentacles together and bounces in her seat, pigtailed swishing with the movement. "See, I told you it was totally a meet-cute earlier. You two are just the most adorable couple already. I am fully on board with this mission. You're totally going to make him fall in love with you. I know it."

I can't stop from blushing at her words. There's a part of me that would very much like Sasha to fall in love with me, but those are foolish wishes. We're from two different worlds. Literally.

Besides, I've already promised to take him home in a few weeks. He has a whole other life back on Earth, and there's no way that I could live there. Any ideas of romance between us seem doomed from the beginning.

But that doesn't change my objective. His story about his family moved me greatly. For all the troubles that I've had with my own parents, I know that they would never disown me in such a cruel and horrific fashion. They have never hated me for who I am or who I love.

Granted, I've always been quite different from most other Dravethians, but my parents have only ever wanted for me to be healthy, happy, and safe. It's why I know their marriage machinations come from a place of deep love and concern. Even if that concern is unfounded and grounded in traditions that I shook off just like I did the planetary dust of Draveth as I sailed to freedom among the stars.

But Sasha does not have that same kind of unwavering love and support. Just the thought of what he went through nearly brings me to tears again and I have to fight to keep more waterworks at bay.

Instantly Najar goes on alert. My best friend knows me far too well.

“What is it? What aren't you telling us?” Then his gaze sharpens. “Are you crying?”

I sniffle. “No.”

Damn. That was far from convincing.

Luna frowns. “Why are you crying?”

Najar growls. “Did Sasha do somethi—”

I cut him off. “No! Sasha and I had a wonderful date. He shared a tragic personal story with me about how he lost his Christmas spirit, and it moved me deeply.” I take a shaky breath. “He does not deserve the pain that others have dealt him in his life. I want to give something back to him. After all, it is in keeping with the spirit of the season.” I take a deep breath and go for broke. “I want to be able to help Sasha regain his Christmas spirit so he can reclaim this holiday and the joy it brings.”

Najar shakes his head slowly and reaches out a tentacle to coil around my thumb, a reassuring gesture we've shared since childhood. “Kheph, you're a wonderfully tenderhearted individual, but I worry that you're becoming too attached to this Earthling.”

It's my turn to frown. “What are you trying to say?”

Najar sighs. “I’m sure Sasha’s a perfectly lovely human, but you know you can’t keep him, right?”

My tentacles bristle at his words and I’m surprised at their outrage, but I understand. They intuitively feel a connection with Sasha and so do I.

I just don’t know what to do about it.

Luna pipes up. “Najar, I know you mean well, but you could be wrong. It’s very possible that if Sasha falls in love with Kheph, he might want to stay with us.”

Her words ignite a flame of fiery hope and yearning deep inside me. I straighten. “You think he could love me?”

Luna grins. “Anything’s possible when it comes to love. Isn’t that what all the movies have told us?”

I think back on all the many romantic stories we’ve watched together, and her words sink down deep, resonating like the chime of a gong. “You’re one hundred percent right.” We immediately high-tentacle one another.

Najar crosses his arms and leans back in his chair to stare at the ceiling. “How I got stuck being friends with two eternal optimists, I will never know.”

I give him a mischievous grin. “You know you love it. Don’t even pretend otherwise.”

Najar’s lips twitch. “Perhaps. I just don’t want you to get your hearts broken if things don’t go the way you desire.”

I consider his words carefully. I may be a little bit impetuous at times, but I do respect Najar and his wisdom. He has often been a sounding board for me when I’ve made the most crucial decisions in life.

“I don’t know what lies ahead,” I admit. “But I do know that I’m starting to care about him. My tentacles tingle every time he’s near me. I dream about him.” I sigh, not bothering to hide the dreamy look on my face. “I want to know everything about him.”

“Awww,” Luna coos. “You’re falling in lurve!”

I blush but don't deny it. It's probably true. I've never felt like this about anyone before.

“Sasha deserves happiness. It hurts to know that others have taken this wonderful holiday joy away from him. If I can bring it back, then I'll feel like we've been able to triumph over the hatred of those who hurt him in the past.”

Najar nods solemnly and gives my thumb a last squeeze with his tentacle before retracting it. “I won't ask for details as it's clear he has shared a confidence with you. But I trust you, and if you think this is something you need to do, then I'll support you in any way I can. Just like I always have.”

Luna flips a pigtail over her shoulder and gives me two thumbs-up. “Me too. Besides, helping Sasha regain his Christmas spirit sounds like a super fun mission if you ask me. Let's do it!”

“We're on a mission from God,” Rambo intones.

“Something like that,” Luna says, patting his shiny head.

My eyes get teary again and I sniffle. “You're the best friends a Dravethian could ask for.”

We bring it in for a group hug, Rambo included, before they let go.

Najar is all business after that little emotional outpouring. “Okay, tell me what you're thinking. How do we start? Knowing you, Kheph, you have a plan already.”

I grin. He understands me *so* well.

My tentacles swish through the air with barely contained excitement. “I think it's time for a trip to an intergalactic space market.”

Luna's tentacles wave like mad. “Fuck yeah. It's a treat-yourself-shopping mission!”

Najar tilts his head in confusion. “What is the point of this?”

I grin. “It seems that Sasha would like to acquire some more stylish clothing than our generator can make.”

Luna rolls her eyes. “Duh. Of course he does. That stuff is bare-bones essentials. It’s not what someone would wear to look and feel good about themselves. It’s all just pure utility and comfort.”

I nod. “Exactly. I hadn’t really thought about it before, but he was admiring my clothing during our date, and I got the impression he wished for something else for himself.”

Luna rubs her hands together with glee and several tentacles mimic the gesture. “Ooh, I’m so excited.”

Najar still looks confused. “I don’t see how this is going to revive his Christmas spirit, so to speak.”

I waggle a finger and several tentacles at him. “Oh, ye of little faith. We’re also going to covertly hunt out some things to decorate the ship and give it a full Christmas makeover!”

Luna jumps to her feet and begins dancing around the room. “Oh, my galactic gods! This is going to be so much fun.”

Najar frowns. “How are we going to find human Christmas embellishments at the intergalactic space market?”

I shrug. “Well, they won’t be exact, but we can improvise. Surely we can find things that come close to approximating Christmas decorations.”

Luna nods eagerly. “I think so.”

I beam at them both. “Here’s my plan. Luna is going to take Sasha to a clothing vendor and help him try on some outfits. Meanwhile, Najar and I are going to claim we need to pick up some supplies for the ship.”

Najar arches an eyebrow. “We actually do need some supplies, Kheph.”

I beam. “Even better! We won’t have to lie.”

He chuckles. “All right. But you do know that I haven’t really seen many of the Christmas films you two love. I’m not the best one to try to help you find the items you’re looking for.”

I frown, sensing a wrench in my plan.

Luna holds up a tentacle. “I know I wanted to help Sasha look for clothes but what if Najar and I traded places? I can help you find what we need, Kheph, and Najar can help Sasha look for clothing.” She pauses and hesitates for a moment, regarding Najar’s plain, utilitarian clothing. “Well, maybe not help him, but he can accompany him and keep him safe while Sasha picks out his own clothes.”

Najar arches an unimpressed eyebrow at Luna. “Are you trying to say something about my attire?”

“Of course not,” she says with a fake sweet smile. “It’s very...*minimalist* in its aesthetic.”

Najar rolls his eyes. “You two are utterly ridiculous.”

“We’re just enthusiastic,” I tell him. “Now, Phase One of my plan is decorating the ship. In Phase Two, I want to give Sasha some special experiences.”

Luna waggles her eyebrows, and one of her tentacles makes a lewd gesture. “I know exactly what kind of experiences you want to give him, Kheph.”

My cheeks flush hotly. I can’t exactly deny what she’s saying, especially after that sex dream last night, but I choose not to comment. Instead, I lay out my plan for them in intricate detail.

When I finish, they both look at me, stunned.

“Oh,” Luna whispers. “Honey, I think you’re half in love with him already if you’re going to go to these lengths to try to make him happy.”

Najar’s smile is fond and acquiescent. “We’ve always known how Kheph is. He doesn’t go halfway when he cares about someone. It’s with all of his hearts.” He regards me with warm eyes. “If Sasha isn’t half in love with you too by the end of this, then I don’t know a damn thing.”

I smile. “Let’s just hope my plan works and Sasha can regain his Christmas spirit. It has become my new mission.” I want to see him light up with joy, no matter what it takes.

Once they've all left, I recalibrate our navigation to ensure we reach our new destination in the morning. Then I spend several hours in the Augmented Reality Simulation Environment programming my hearts away as I work on Phase Three of my plan to help Sasha regain his Christmas spirit.

Who needs sleep when such important work must be done?



Chapter Ten

Buckle up, intrepid traveler! Many amazing adventures await you as you navigate the universe. However, don't forget the practical preparations needed for space travel. No matter how advanced, every ship must replenish supplies or replace equipment at some point along the way. Make sure you've mapped out appropriate travel stops on your route in case you need to take a short detour for necessities. After all, no one wants to get stuck out in the middle of the Skulgog Nebula without any help for millions of miles!

—*The Lonely Universe Guide to Space Travel for Beginners*

SASHA

When I open my eyes and look out my panoramic window, I do a double take and blink furiously, but the view doesn't change.

I fly out of bed and race to the window, unsure what to make of the sight in front of me. Our ship appears to be docked in some kind of massive hangar for similar vessels. We're no longer coasting through the galaxy; we've made a pit stop somewhere I wasn't expecting.

Just then, the com in my room crackles to life and Khephren's bubbly voice comes over the speakers. "Good morning, Sasha! I don't want you to be alarmed when you discover that our ship has docked in a space port, but we're making a little side trip for some supplies at an intergalactic space market. I hope you don't mind."

Immediately, my interest is piqued. "Is this a market I can visit with you?" I ask, a bubble of excitement beginning to rise

inside me. An intergalactic space market? Just imagine what I might see there!

Khephren chuckles and the sound sends erotic shivers straight to my balls, which doesn't help my already present morning wood. I grab my hard-on and groan softly, hoping he doesn't hear me.

All the while secretly praying that he does and decides to come join me.

Alas, Khephren continues talking away, wholly unaware of my predicament, which is probably for the best. "If you would be so good as to get ready and join us on the bridge in fifteen minutes, we're all going to head out to explore the market together. We'd love to have you join us."

There is *no* way I am missing this. "I'll be there."

The com clicks off and I scurry to the bathroom to hop in the shower for a quick five-minute scrub-down, all the while thinking boner-killing things. Like my ex-boss in his elf costume, fake pointy ears and all.

In no time, I'm pulling on my clothes and brushing my teeth. I'm ready in ten minutes flat and I give Jonesy a quick kiss on her head before refilling her water bowl and adding breakfast to her dish. She lays sprawled out on the bed, content to stay there and relax, it seems.

I'm a little startled to notice that my fur baby is looking a bit plumper than when we first joined the ship. Maybe it's just my imagination. I'll have to ask Khephren if the generator perhaps miscalculated the percentages in her kibble. If so, I'll need to scale back a little bit on what I'm feeding her.

When I first got on the ship, Khephren hadn't been sure if he could simulate Jonesy's food correctly, but it seemed to work after a few tries. We were super lucky I happened to have some of my baby girl's food with me in my bag! Now I'm just concerned the simulation might have made a bit of an error in the fat content or caloric density.

When I arrive at the bridge, I spot Khephren and Luna. Their whole bodies, especially their tentacles, vibrate with

barely contained excitement.

It's stupidly cute and has the unintended effect of increasing my own eagerness for this outing.

Najar, as usual, is far more stoic, his tawny face unreadable. He hasn't been exactly what I would call openly friendly to me since I arrived, nor has he been hostile. He just seems wary. I suspect he's waiting me out, undecided as to what he thinks about me—and the feeling's kind of mutual.

Although, I do get the impression he's a pretty good guy; he'd have to be since he's Khephren's best friend. Tentacle Boy is too pure and sweet to not have an equally good best friend.

"So, what's the plan?" I ask. "I'm assuming this market is safe for me to go into as a human?"

One of Khephren's tentacles automatically moves toward me and takes hold of my hand, giving it a squeeze. "It is. We have verified that the oxygen levels and gravity of the market are suitable for human life-forms. Your species has a biological makeup that is not dissimilar to some of the core physiology of most bipedal species in the universe."

Now, there's something you don't learn every day.

"Cool." I'm not really sure what else to say. There's so much I don't know and have no hopes of learning in the short time I'll be with Khephren and his friends. For now, I'm just going to have to wing it at the market.

A thought occurs to me. "I don't need some kind of intergalactic passport or anything, do I?"

Luna chuckles. "No, not for an intergalactic space market. You would if we were traveling to certain planets that require similar documentation, but this is a safe port for any and all travelers. We will, however, have to go through a scanning mechanism. This is a neutral zone, no weapons allowed."

I hold up both hands, including the one still being held by Khephren's warm, pink tentacle. "No worries here. I'm not a weapons kind of guy." Not unless you count my nuclear-grade sarcasm, that is.

Khephren does a little shimmy, his tentacles mimicking the motion. “Excellent. We’re ready to go.”

He keys in a code on a nearby control panel and to my amazement, the wall opens and descends into a walkway going down from the ship and into the hangar. Following behind the others, I look around with undisguised wonder.

The hangar where our ship is parked—docked?—is enormous, and it houses hundreds of other ships both big and small.

“This is like the intergalactic version of the Mall of America parking lot,” I mutter to myself. It’s freaking massive!

Around us, I see all kinds of new-to-me life-forms. It’s like something out of the greatest sci-fi imaginations in film history. *The Fifth Element* didn’t even touch the tip of the galactic iceberg!

It’s hard for me to focus on walking and absorbing everything I’m seeing at the same time. When I nearly bump into a tailed, two-headed purple alien who gives me a grouchy look, Khephren’s tentacle, which hasn’t let go of me yet, pulls me closer to his side. I inhale sharply as my body comes into direct contact with his and my traitorous dick starts to perk up.

Thankfully, Khephren seems oblivious to his effect on me. “Stay close, Sasha. There are many beings here, and not all of them friendly. We do not wish to lose you in the crowd.”

Way to put a guy at ease. *Not!*

As much as I want to gawk at everything around me, I need to play it cool and stay focused. I don’t want to lose them either. They’re the Obi-Wan Kenobi to my Princess Leia—my only hope when it comes to getting back to Earth, and I don’t want to get marooned somewhere in space where I can never return home.

After we go through the body scanner, which is just some kind of light that passes over us before we’re cleared to move on, we make our way to what looks like a moving walkway in an airport—only a little more advanced.

Khephren clutches me tightly, several of his tentacles providing support. “Hold on tight,” he warns as we step onto a flat round object hovering above the ground. Once we’re situated, it immediately starts flying through the air, whisking us forward at a mind-boggling speed. The air rushes against our faces and blows Khephren’s pink hair into my eyes. I inhale deeply, enjoying the slightly sweet, citrusy scent of his hair tickling my nostrils.

By the time the large, flat disc comes to a halt, I’m a little dizzy. Khephren carefully helps me onto solid ground again, much to my relief. He flashes me a sheepish grin. “The high-speed conveyor takes a little getting used to, I know, but it is quite convenient. From the hangar to the market is a considerable distance, even more so today because we were required to dock farther out than we would have liked. It’s evidently rather busy here at the moment.”

Luna and Najar join us, and I give Khephren a weak smile as I work to regain my equilibrium. “Not a problem. New experiences, amirite?”

His answering smile is blinding. “Exactly! Come, let’s explore the market.”

Turns out it wasn’t just the parking lot that gave off Mall of America vibes. I start to laugh. “Oh my freaking god. This is a giant intergalactic space mall.”

Khephren eyes me curiously. “Mall?”

“Yeah. A shopping mall?”

“Ah ha! Yes, I’ve seen those in films before. An apt analogy.”

Never in my life did I ever think I would go shopping in an intergalactic space mall with tentacled aliens who abducted me from Earth. My life has certainly taken an unexpected turn. In my head, I know I should be sort of freaked out and terrified by what’s going on right now, I’m mostly just really fucking excited to see what we’re going to find here. It’s so damn cool!

As we wander through the market, I peer into the storefronts. Although they are set up a bit more like partially

enclosed booths of various sizes, structured like mini open garages or storage sheds, they appear to be selling everything from food to clothing and accessories, plus all kinds of technology that is a mystery to me.

Luna clears her throat loudly. “So, uh, Kheph and I need to hit up a few places to get some supplies for the ship. While we’re doing that, Najar is going to take you to some clothing vendors, Sasha, so you can upgrade your wardrobe.”

I come to an abrupt stop and hold up my free hand since Khephren still has a hold on my other one. “Oh, that’s not necessary. I mean, I don’t have any money. I was pretty broke when you guys picked me up.”

Khephren’s tentacle squeezes my wrist gently. “This is a gift from me to you. After all, you were unable to collect any of your things before we picked you up. It’s my responsibility to ensure you have some garments that make you feel happy and comfortable.”

I flush. Oh dear. He clearly took my comments the other night far more seriously than I intended. I wasn’t trying to ask for clothes. I was just being snarky and bitchy.

“Seriously, I don’t want to put you to any trouble. These generated ones are fine.”

Luna puts both hands on her hips and one of her tentacles tosses a green pigtail behind her back in a saucy move. “Oh, please. Generated clothes are drab and utilitarian at best. They’re really mostly our emergency replacements. If you’re going to be with us for a couple of weeks in Earth time, then you need some fun stuff to enhance your wardrobe.”

I cast a reluctant glance at Najar. “And...he’s going to go with me?” I shift my attention to Khephren. “Can’t it be you?” God, did that sound needy as fuck or what? Ugh.

For some odd reason, Khephren flushes and looks away. “I’m sorry but some of the goods we need for the ship only I can trade for. Because Luna takes care of our engines, she needs to be the one to help me with what we need for routine maintenance. Only Najar is free to accompany you.”

The mysterious golden-hued alien gives me a faint smile. “Let’s go, Earthling.”

I take a deep breath and firm my resolve.

You can do this, Sasha. Don’t freak out. Look at this as an opportunity to get to know this big, semi-scary fellow. He is Khephren’s best friend, after all. It might be smart to get on his good side.

I straighten my back and nod my head. “Okay, will we all meet up somewhere when we’re done?”

Khephren nods. “Najar will be able to contact us when you’re ready and we will meet near the food arena.” He steps closer and the tentacle releases my hand, then moves to caress my cheek. “Have fun and pick out whatever you would like. As I said, this shopping expedition is on me. Fear not, I have plenty of credits to spend.”

Najar snorts. “That’s the truth. Khephren designs computer programs that are highly desired across the galaxy. One of the reasons he could afford to buy the Sleigh Belle and refurbish it with all of the latest high-tech amenities is because he’s more than fiscally solvent.”

Wow. So apparently I was kidnapped by the Bill Gates of tentacled aliens!

As we head our separate ways, I feel a twinge in my heart watching Khephren walk away with Luna.

Far more insightful and aware than he should be, Najar puts a hand on my shoulder and murmurs, “Do not fear. They won’t be gone long. We will reconnect with them later.”

I give him a wry smile. “It was that obvious, huh?”

He shrugs and his lips twitch. “Maybe just a little.”

I laugh. “All right, fine. Where are you taking me to find some clothes?”

Najar studies me, a thoughtful expression on his tawny face. “What kind of garments do you favor on your planet?”

I think about it for a second and then describe some of the things I often wear at home.

Eventually, he nods decisively. “I know exactly where we should go. Come.” He reaches out a golden tentacle and hesitates. Bowing slightly, he asks, “May I hold on to you? It is crowded here, and Khephren would never forgive me if I lost you somehow.”

My shoulders slump in relief. “Heck yeah. Hold on tight. I don’t want to get lost either.”

He gives me the first genuine smile I’ve seen from him. The he wraps one of his tentacles around my arm and leads me through the teeming throng of intergalactic beings crowding the space market.

I’m relieved that he’s holding on to me and leading us along. It allows me to look my fill at all the many wonders around me. My poor human brain can’t even begin to process half of it, but I bask in the experience, mentally taking note of the different beings I see. Some could certainly feature in a sci-fi film I make someday.

James Cameron’s *Avatar* would have nothing on what I could create after this outing!

Eventually, we arrive at the vendor Najar had in mind and step inside the shop, which is quite a bit larger than some of the others we passed. Some kind of extraterrestrial music is playing over speakers and the space is lit up to showcase the many, colorful pieces of clothing that abound here. To my relief, the store isn’t too busy, with only a few patrons browsing clothing that circulates around the room on automated clothing racks. They remind me of the ones I’ve seen at the dry cleaners before, only a bit classier and less industrial.

Najar lets go of my arm but stays close by as I begin to peruse the various garments rolling by. I’m immediately amused by the sheer variety of clothing aimed at species with more appendages than I have. Not something I’ve ever thought much about before meeting aliens, that’s for sure.

With an amused smirk, Najar guides me over to a moving rack with clothing aimed more toward species with two arms and two legs, and I soon find some attractive leggings that remind me of my usual skinny jeans at home. I grab a couple of pairs in black and gray to try on. I also snag several stylish tunics that I decide to try on.

Once my arms are full, I visit the store's version of a changing room, where an automated voice greets me as I close the door.

“Welcome to Andromeda Attire's garment preview room. Please leave behind any articles of clothing you do not wish to purchase so that the room may automatically sanitize them during its self-cleaning cycle between customers. Thank you and have a wonderful day!”

I shake my head as I begin to try on clothes. Talk about surreal.

Extraterrestrial clothing is definitely different from what I'm used to on Earth. The fabrics in particular are completely foreign feeling but are quite comfortable and seem durable. Much to my surprise, I end up liking most of the items I've selected, and they look good on me. However, now I'm stuck with a conundrum. Khephren said he had plenty of credits, which I'm assuming counts for money here, but I'm loath to spend a small fortune on clothes, and I haven't the foggiest idea how expensive anything is.

There's a light knock on the door. “Everything okay in there?” Najar asks in his deep voice.

I decide to be honest about my concerns. “It's great, actually. Everything fits and I like them all. I'm just not sure how much to get.” I open the door and shift from foot to foot.

He surveys the room and what I've selected. “Just get them all,” he says matter-of-factly.

I throw my hands in the air. “How expensive is this stuff, even? I don't want to be taking advantage of Khephren. Let's be real. I haven't known him long, but it's obvious he's a far

too tenderhearted cinnamon roll who would probably give away every last penny he had to someone in need.”

Najar’s eyes soften as he regards me. “You understand him well.”

I shrug, feeling my cheeks flush. “I don’t think he’s a hard person to know. He’s so open and honest, and naively optimistic about everything.” I shake my head. “It’s a wonder that reality hasn’t snuffed that light out in him yet.”

Najar chuckles. “I’m not sure if any force in this universe could diminish Khephren’s light. But Luna and I have worked long and hard to protect him over the years. As his best friends, we too understand that he is special and must be protected so he can continue to share his many talents with others.”

I tilt my head, considering him. “He and Luna are a lot alike. You seem far more practical.”

Najar shrugs. “I have lived a different life than they have. Being part of Draveth’s warrior class exposed me to certain realities that I would never want either of them to experience. Losing my warrior parents in battle at a young age and growing up without them, I had to learn to adapt and fend for myself. Khephren’s family took me in and paid for my training so I could become a live-in bodyguard for their son when we came of age. I will always be indebted to them for their kindness and generosity, but I have been on my own in a way that Khephren never has.”

I reach out carefully and place my hand on his shoulder. “I understand, more than you can know. I lost my family too and have been alone ever since.” I shrug. “Well, me and Jonesy.”

Najar’s kaleidoscope eyes turn serious. “I am sorry for your loss. Did they die?”

I sigh. “No. But I did, in their eyes. They disowned me for being gay.”

Najar’s frown morphs into an enraged scowl. “They disowned you because of your sexual orientation?”

“Pretty much.” I grimace.

“Utterly appalling. I cannot imagine anyone abandoning their child for being born this way. I’m so sorry.”

I make a mental note to introduce Najar to the music of Lady Gaga since I have a feeling he’d appreciate it. “Yeah, well maybe your species is a little bit more advanced than ours when it comes to logic and reasoning.”

He gives me a faint smile. “On some things, yes. On others, not so much. Our people still hold firmly to traditions that elevate the warrior class and subordinate those who are not part of it.”

“The whole marriage for protection thing, you mean?”

He nods. “There are other ways in which they hold steadfast to those traditions. I was born with a warrior’s mark and raised in the warrior class, trained to defend the planet, yet I’ve never wished to make that my purpose in life. It’s not my calling. While I will defend and protect those I love, like Khephren and Luna, I wish for something more. A different way of life, freedom from expectations that are as ill-fitting as a coat that has become too small and strains at the seams.”

“I hear that.” We share a look of genuine understanding.

“Let’s pay for these and get going.”

I follow him to the checkout kiosk where an interesting, gray-skinned alien with shimmery iridescent scales along their neck and gills on their cheeks reaches out webbed hands to take my clothes and ring them up. Najar hands over a device to be scanned, and the items are paid for.

As we head out of the store, Najar checks his com device. “I have a message from Khephren. He wants us to wait at the entrance to the food arena until he and Luna are finished with their shopping.” He once again extends a golden tentacle and wraps it around my wrist. “Follow me.”

As we navigate through the crowds, I watch him out of the corner of my eye. Najar is quite handsome. Like Khephren, he’s tall and even more muscular and well-built than his best friend. I see why he might be a warrior among his people. However, I’m also beginning to suspect that he’s a pretty

damn good guy. He clearly cares deeply for both Khephren and Luna, and I'm honored that he opened up a bit to me. I think that's why I was willing to share my story with him in return.

Maybe, just maybe, we might become friends as well.



Chapter Eleven

Traveling the universe can be lonely. It's beautiful beyond all imagination but also vast in ways that can make us feel small and insignificant in comparison. Take it from us, it's always best to travel with good friends, family, or other loved ones. Community and connection make all the difference in the dark, seemingly endless expanse of the universe. Choose your companions wisely; it can be a very long way from one destination to the next!

—*The Lonely Universe Guide to Space Travel for Beginners*

SASHA

Najar and I end up having to wait at the meeting point quite a bit longer than we expected. As the minutes tick by, I start to get twitchy. But Najar remains calm, coolly surveying the crowd and on alert for his friends.

I don't know how much time passes, but my anxiety grows with each second. Surely Khephren didn't abandon me? *No, you're being silly. He would never leave Najar behind.*

Glancing at my large companion, I almost want to reach out and grab onto several more of his tentacles to make sure he can't get rid of me. Yes, I know I'm being a little paranoid, but I don't want him slipping off into the crowd and leaving me here on my lonesome with bags of clothes and no way to get home.

"It's all right. Do not fret," he tells me, clearly sensing my agitation. "Luna and Khephren are well-meaning, but they often get carried away and are rarely, if ever, on time."

My shoulders slump and I sit beside him on an oblong-shaped bench made of a hard but surprisingly comfortable material. “That I can believe.” I stiffen as a new worry grows in my mind. “Could he be in trouble? Do we need to check on him?”

A sly, knowing grin spreads across Najar’s face as he looks at me, and I feel my cheeks flush.

“I had no idea you cared so much about my friend, Sasha.”

“I...that’s not...what?” I sputter incoherently, unable to form an articulate response to that ridiculous idea. After all, I barely know Khephren.

Najar nods. “I’m relieved to see this thing isn’t one-sided.”

“What *thing*?” I demand testily.

“I’ll check to see where he is.” He reaches out to pat my knee. “For your sake.”

I growl at him. “Watch it, buddy. I’m on to you. You act all stoic and noble, but underneath you’re a sassy, sarcastic bitch.”

“I believe the human expression is, ‘takes one to know one.’”

I narrow my eyes. “All the more reason not to push me unless you want to lose one of those tentacles of yours.”

He thinks about it and then shrugs. “That’s all right. It’d grow back.”

What.

The.

Fuck.

That sonofabitch smirks when he leaves me utterly gobsmacked and calmly uses his com device to contact Khephren. He murmurs quietly to him while my mind reels.

They can regrow their tentacles? Holy fucking shit.

Najar ends his brief discussion. “All is well. He and Luna are on their way. As predicted, they’re simply running behind

schedule.”

I don't bother trying to hide the sigh of relief that escapes me.

All right, there might be something to what he said. Yes, I care. Why wouldn't I? Khephren and I have decided to be friends. Friends care about each other, right?

That's what I tell myself as I study the crowd, waiting a small eternity until I spot familiar pink tentacles waving in the air as they make their way toward me. Just the sight of them in the distance calms something deep inside me and I'm able to relax once more.

Khephren and Luna hurry over to us, both of them looking slightly disheveled but bright-eyed with excitement yet again.

Despite myself, I grin back. “You two look like you have something to say.”

Khephren flushes. “I have something to show you back on the ship.”

Color me intrigued!

“I love surprises. Lead the way.” I get to my feet and haul my bags with me.

Instantly, several of Khephren's tentacles whip out. “Please let me help you carry your purchases.” He looks so hopeful I can't deny him such a simple request. I allow his tentacles to take hold of the bags and they lift them aloft with ease.

“Impressive! I had no idea your tentacles were so strong.”

Khephren puffs his chest out. “You honor me with your praise.” He waves the bags overhead. “Come, let's hurry. I can't wait to share the surprise.”

My own eagerness to discover Khephren's surprise leaves me off balance. One thing I'll definitely give Khephren, he keeps me on my toes.

Fortunately, my second time on the high-speed conveyor is quite a bit smoother, and I disembark feeling far firmer in my equilibrium than after the previous trip.

When we're near the walkway that leads onto the Sleigh Belle, Khephren pauses and pulls out what looks like a large handkerchief from his pocket. "May I blindfold you?"

My eyebrows practically wing their way up to my hairline. From almost anyone else, I'd assume that was a prelude to something kinky. "Uh, why exactly?"

He rubs his hands together. "It's half the fun! I want to make sure I can gauge your reaction the moment you see my surprise. If you get a sneak peek, then your response might not be entirely genuine." He pushes out his bottom lip in a stupidly adorable pout that should definitely be illegal.

Fucking A. I don't know what it is about this guy, but I cannot say no to him when he's like this. His cuteness powers are one hundred percent my kryptonite, sucking the jadedness and sarcasm right out of me. They're tearing down all of my carefully constructed defenses, and that's a pretty terrifying realization.

With a heavy sigh, I agree to his request. But when he steps behind me to pull the blindfold over my eyes and tie it at the back of my head, goose flesh pebbles all over my skin at his delicate, warm touch. It's unfairly sensual and turns me on in no time flat. Meanwhile, Khephren seemingly has no idea what effect he's having on me without even trying.

Good lord. I'm in over my head with no idea how to rescue myself from the feelings Khephren is awakening in me at the speed of light.

Once the blindfold is tightened, Khephren takes my hand and begins to lead me up the walkway, his tentacle still holding my bags like a gentleman. He's wooing the fuck out of me without even trying!

"Did you have fun with Najar?" His tone is hopeful and curious.

I chuckle. "Actually, I did. We're more alike than I realized and bonded a bit over our pasts."

Khephren's voice softens. "Yes, he too has lost his family. You both amaze me with your resilience and fortitude. I

admire the strength of will you both possess in the face of so many trials and tribulations.”

I inhale sharply, fighting back tears. How the hell have I turned into such an emotional wreck in such a short amount of time? Khephren has somehow opened rusty floodgates inside me and all kinds of shit I’ve been holding back just keeps spewing out.

And yes, it’s about as attractive as it sounds. Ugh.

“I’m glad you were able to find suitable garments for you to wear.”

I snort. “More than enough. If all those bags you’re carrying don’t make it clear, then yes, I sure did.”

He leans down and softly whispers in my ear. “I look forward to seeing you in them.”

His hot breath against the sensitive shell of my ear sends a thrill down my spine and right to my traitorous balls. What the actual fuck is happening to me? I’ve known Khephren for a couple of days at most, and he fucking abducted me from Earth for the most bananas reason I could ever imagine! Yet his sweetness and charm are knocking down every single defense I’ve built up around my heart oh so carefully since my parents disowned me—and I don’t know how.

Seriously, it’s totally my kryptonite.

If I didn’t know better, I’d think he was using magic on me. The guy has wiles he doesn’t even seem aware of, and it’s maddening.

And really fucking sexy.

I stumble as I reach the top of the walkway, but Khephren takes firm hold of me and ensures I don’t fall. “Careful, Sasha.”

Yet again, he whispers in my ear, and I shudder at the intimate sensation. I’ve always had a thing for lovers nuzzling my ears and my neck. They’re definitely erogenous zones for me. Khephren seems to intuitively know this without even trying.

Something stills inside me.

Hold the fuck up. Did I just associate Khephren with a lover?

Yes. Yes, I did.

That is *so* not good.

Sure, I totally want to fuck him. Who wouldn't? But a lover is something more. Something I should want to run very fucking far from.

I'm still in a bit of a daze as Khephren leads me further into the ship. While I try to absorb this latest kernel of self-awareness, I hear the sounds of the walkway retracting closed behind me.

Trapped on a ship with Tentacle Boy. No problem, right?

We make our way toward what I think is the bridge of the Sleigh Belle, and that's where we stop.

"I'm going to take the blindfold off now. Are you ready?"

I have no idea what to expect at this moment, but I know anything is better than focusing on my thoughts.

With a flourish, Khephren removes the blindfold and I slowly blink my eyes open, trying to process what I see. The bridge is now fully decked out in a bizarre alien version of Christmas paraphernalia.

There's several strings of lights in various shapes and colors wound around different pieces of furniture in the room. A strange shimmering substance is draped along the walls, red bows tied along its length. I blink several times because it appears to be *moving*. An even stranger-looking tree of some kind sits in the corner and stares at us.

Stares. With *eyes*. In its trunk.

I try not to hyperventilate.

Khephren is practically bouncing on his toes as he tells me he has put this together just for me. "What do you think?" His voice is so full of hope. "Is it a good likeness of Christmas decorations on your world?"

I stare at everything again, especially the creepy tree that's reminiscent of something out of a Guillermo del Toro film. "Oh, uh, yes. It's impressive, all right."

His smile begins to dim at my less than enthusiastic response. "Do you not... like it?"

I feel a guilty twinge in my chest that I don't enjoy. "It was very kind of you to do this, I'm just wondering why."

Khephren flushes prettily. "I wanted to help you feel the Christmas spirit again. I thought perhaps seeing our ship decorated to celebrate this most wondrous holiday might help rekindle your love for it." His tentacles droop. "It seems my plan has failed."

I can't stand to see him sad, and I am touched that he would do this for me. No one does nice shit for me.

Before I can even think about it, I wrap my arms around him in the tightest hug I've given to anyone in years.

He freezes in shock for several long moments before letting out a happy sigh and wrapping his arms and a few tentacles around me in return. I press my forehead against his firm, muscular chest and inhale his alluring scent.

Damn the man, but he's sexy.

"Thank you," I whisper in a choked voice. "No one has done anything like this for me before. I love it."

Sure, they look nothing like real Christmas decorations, but I can tell that he and Luna went to a lot of work for me.

I also realize that sending me off clothes shopping with Najar was a bit of a ruse to get me out of the way so that they could enact their plan. It's the sweetest damn thing ever.

Kryptonite, I tell you!

As I stay there in Khephren's warm embrace, feeling him vibrate with happiness, I notice something I missed while trying to process all the visual strangeness around me.

"Are you playing Christmas music through the ship's com system?"

He rubs my back with one hand and what I suspect are several tentacles. “A nice touch, is it not?”

I can't hold back a laugh. “You're one of a kind, Khephren Thrase. That's for damn sure.”

“As are you, Sasha Vasiliev.”

“Oh my freaking galactic gods! You two are so stinking adorable together,” Luna squeals.

We both pull apart at light speed at her words, flushing like two horny teenagers caught in the act, and reminded that we aren't exactly alone. For some reason, everything except the two of us faded away for a moment there.

“So, uh, tell me about these decorations.” I'm grasping at straws here.

Najar sighs. “Oh dear. Here we go.”

Khephren immediately takes me on a tour of the bridge, explaining to me how they purchased a special kind of living moss that shimmers and can be hung like tinsel. “The added benefit,” he says, “is that it acts as an air-purifying system, thus providing the double benefit of improving our air quality while also looking festive.”

He moves over to the blinking lights that have been strung haphazardly around the room. “While we do not possess your particular Christmas lights, these were some odds and ends from salvaged ships that we thought might be able to simulate them.”

“They're very bright,” I offer as I squint and try not to look at them directly.

He nods with obvious pleasure. “I know, right? Luna figured out how to make them super bright so that they can make the moss extra reflective as well. Shiny and bright is our Christmas motto!”

Finally, he takes me over to the freaky-looking tree in a pot. Its open eyes regard us with what I can only call a glare.

I swallow. “And what is this?”

“This is a Chumarg tree. They are common on ships of the Neloran people. I know he doesn’t look exactly like a Christmas tree, but we can decorate him with ornaments if we wish.”

I gulp. “Wow. The eyes really seem to follow you, ya know?”

“Of course, they do. They’re good at spotting idiots.”

I jump back at the tree’s raspy words. “Holy shit! It *talks*?”

Khephren looks confused. “There’s nothing to fear. His people are peaceful. Howie here has long been searching for a ship to travel on but has not been chosen until now.”

I totally understand why. We got the Grinch of a Charlie Brown tree species for the Sleigh Belle! But Khephren seems so inordinately pleased and delighted with his choice that I can’t say anything against it.

I force a smile. “That’s amazing. Welcome to the ship, Howie.”

The potted tree rolls his eyes at me. “Whatever. I’m taking a nap.” He closes his eyes and goes silent.

I turn my attention back to Khephren, who’s waiting for me to comment on his efforts. What can one even say in a situation like this?

Fuck this. I know *exactly* what I want to say. And damn it, I will. Because I want it more than anything.

I straighten. “Khephren Thrase.”

His eyes widen at my serious tone.

“Would you do me the honor of going on another date with me tonight? In the Sleigh Belle’s movie theater?”

His megawatt smile burns brighter than a supernova.

“I would be delighted.”

Luna claps her hands together gleefully.

Rambo beeps three times and adds, “As you wish.”

In the background, I hear Mariah Carey singing “All I Want for Christmas Is You,” and for the first time in a long while, I tell my inner cynic to shut the fuck up. All I seem to want for Christmas is this sweeter than a sugar-plum Tentacle Boy, and I’m not waiting for Santa to help make him mine.



Chapter Twelve

Privately Relayed Intergalactic Communication and Knowledge System (PRICKS)

Stardate: 47634.49

DataMaster: Help! I have a date with my fake fiancé! A *real* date.

EatMyCometDust: Things are moving along nicely. Good job!

NebulaNerd: This has gone from bad to worse.

DrWhoDaFuck: Screw that, @NebulaNerd. You don't have a romantic bone in your body. This has gone from awesome to EPIC!

EatMyCometDust: I still can't believe he agreed to be your fake fiancé. This guy is cool. Can't wait to meet him!

DrWhoDaFuck: Okay, so who proposed this real date?

DataMaster: He did! *tentacle with heart emoji*

NebulaNerd: Huh. Maybe the two of you are both foolish enough to be perfect for each other.

EatMyCometDust: Supersquee! Just ignore @NebulaNerd. You two are totally meant for each other in the very best ways. Maybe a real wedding won't be too far away.

DataMaster: I've been taking it slow, like we talked about. But now *he* asked *me* out on a date! What do I do?

EatMyCometDust: Keep it chill, relaxed. Do something fun together and see where the date takes you.

DrWhoDaFuck: Agreed. The vibe should be pressure free, but you also don't want to snuff out the flames of desire if they're simmering in the background or raging to the forefront.

DataMaster: I have a bad feeling this is going to be harder than I imagined...

KHEPHREN

I feel like I'm dreaming.

Sasha asked me on a date—and he didn't even say it was a fake one!

After consulting with my forum pals, I hop in the shower to get ready. While I hurriedly wash my body, my mind wanders, recalling images of Sasha from earlier. Especially the way he shuddered when I whispered in his ear.

He's clearly very sensitive—and wonderfully responsive. My tentacles want to touch him constantly and yearn to explore every inch of his compact little body, but I know I need to take things slow. I've decided to let Sasha be the initiator of any intimacies. That seems the only way for us to move forward on semi-equal footing given the awkwardness of our situation.

I know it might make me a bad person, but I don't regret whisking him away on this adventure. If I hadn't, we never would have met. But it does make things a bit tricky, and I must tread carefully. As my friends on the forum have cautioned, I hold all the power in this situation.

It's all so damn complicated.

But I can't keep fighting the attraction I feel toward him. Earlier, I sensed that I was not alone in this either. We both seem to recognize that there's an energy, a chemistry, between us that is undeniable.

I just hope we can actually explore it together.

Stepping out of the shower, I ransack my closet trying to find a suitable outfit, one that will show off my physical assets to best advantage during our date.

While I may seem oblivious to some things, I have been highly attuned toward Sasha's attention on me, and he clearly enjoys my muscular physique. His recurring glances at my arms and chest are far from subtle.

Grinning, I opt for a snug short-sleeved shirt in pale lavender that hugs my chest and biceps. It goes nicely with my pink skin and tentacles. The pants I select are loose-fitting and made from space-worm silk in a dark gray color. They feel sensual against my skin.

Standing in front of the mirror, I take the time to thoroughly brush my hair and weave several intricate braids into my tresses. When I examine the final look, I am pleased with the reflection that stares back.

Nodding decisively, I exit my quarters and make a beeline for Sasha's room. When I knock on his door, he opens it within milliseconds, as if he was standing on the other side waiting for me.

The very thought makes all three of my hearts lurch in my chest.

When I behold him, I inhale sharply. I knew Sasha was an attractive Earthling, but now that he wears some proper clothing of his own selection, he is even more mesmerizing.

Dressed in tight-fitting black pants that cling to him like a second skin and a deep burgundy tunic that hugs him in the right places and brings out the color of his dark gray eyes, Sasha is stunning.

"You're gorgeous," I tell him, speaking the true words of my hearts.

I've never been one to dissemble or pretend interest. I've always been open and honest, sometimes to a fault. With Sasha, my every thought seems to race to my lips, eager to be shared with him. Even though we've spent most of the day together, just being away from him for a short while to get ready for our date had me anxious to see him again.

It was worth the brief wait though. He takes my breath away.

To my amazement, his cheeks darken slightly, and he gets an almost bashful look on his handsome face. “Thank you. I really appreciate you buying these new clothes for me. I hope they weren’t too expensive.”

I would have paid any sum to see him so happy and comfortable in his skin.

My tentacles wave urgently, trying to put him at ease. “They were gifts freely given. I expect nothing in return.”

I frown, a sudden horrifying thought coming to mind. “Wait. You didn’t ask me on this date because you felt you owed me for the clothing, did you?”

My hearts clench at the very notion and I inhale sharply.

To my relief, Sasha hurries to assuage my fears. “Not at all! I mean, I asked you on a date in part because I was touched by the kindness you’ve shown me ever since I arrived on your ship. It’s more than anyone has done for me in years.”

That thought makes my poor hearts ache. Sasha deserves to be loved and cared for by someone who values him and realizes how special he is.

He looks me dead in the eye. “I’ll be honest. You intrigue me and I want to get to know you better during the short time we have together. I’ve never met anyone quite like you.”

“Nor I you,” I whisper.

This man ties my tentacles in knots.

I stop breathing when, for the first time, he holds out his arm to me. “Will you lead the way? I’m dying to see this theater you told me about.” He winks at me. “I even have some ideas for what we can watch together.”

His words make me feel so buoyant inside I suspect I could float all the way down the corridor and around the entire ship without setting foot on the ground. Swallowing hard, I reach out to take hold of his proffered arm with my hand and one of my eager tentacles.

I’m pleased yet again when he doesn’t even flinch at the touch of my other appendage, instead relaxing into it as if he

was made for it.

And that's the moment I'm hit right in the solar plexus with the irrefutable knowledge that I care deeply for Sasha.

This isn't just some passing fancy, some fascination with him as a human. I *care* about him. He is always at the forefront of my mind, and I regularly think of ways I can make him smile and help him find happiness again.

I've never felt this way about anyone before, but I've seen enough human rom-com films to know what this is.

I'm falling in love with him.

For so many reasons, I should put distance between us. On a rational level, I know all the ways this probably won't work out. I may have run away from my marriage to Colonel Kuretti, but all I want to do now is keep running toward Sasha so he doesn't leave my sight. When I make up my mind about something, I can be a stubborn bastard, so I know that I'm not going to let Sasha go back to Earth without somehow conveying how I feel.

Rather than being freaked out, something settles deep inside me. The universe brought the two of us together, and I plan to make the most of that. There's a real connection between us that could lead to amazing and wondrous possibilities if we take that chance. From this moment on, I'm all in where Sasha Vasiliev is concerned.

I take us through several corridors until we reach the second level of the ship, where my personal theater is housed. Unlocking the room, I usher him inside and turn on the lights.

The tiered seating and enormous screen dominate the room. I had the walls painted black to ensure the best environment to watch films, and I'm rather proud of how it all turned out.

Sasha looks around and whistles appreciatively. "This is impressive."

I give him a private tour and we spend several minutes talking about the projector unit, which is similar to but far more advanced than those on Earth. After I indulge long

enough in my technological geekery by explaining the various facets of the room to him, we settle in and discuss our movie options.

“I know I invited you on this date,” Sasha says. “So, I was thinking we could see a double feature together.”

I’m immediately intrigued by this idea. “Explain what a double feature is, please.”

“Well, it’s when you watch two movies back-to-back. I figured you could pick the first one and I could choose the second. That way, we can each watch something we like and introduce one another to one of our favorites.”

“I like this idea.”

He rubs his hands together. “Sweet.” He pulls out a device he calls a “flash drive” and hands it to me. “I took the liberty of copying my choice on here. Would it be possible for you to play it?”

I contemplate the primitive piece of technology. “Give me but a moment and I’ll see what I can do.”

I head to the small projector room behind the theater and after a few minutes of tweaking some of my equipment, I’m able to download the file stored on his “flash drive.”

When I return, I find Sasha reclined in one of the seats with his arms behind his head as he regards the blank screen on the wall of the theater room. He looks so comfortable and *right* here in one of my favorite parts of the ship. Already I can envision us sharing many movie nights together.

He smiles at me. “Let’s start with your choice.”

I use the control panel on the wall to dim the lights and start one of my all-time favorite Christmas films.

The title credits for *It’s a Wonderful Life* flash on the screen and Sasha grins at me. “You like older classics? Me too!”

A warm, bubbly sensation rises up in my chest. “I love this one. The older black-and-white format caught me off guard at first, but soon I was sucked into the story.”

To my surprise, Sasha reaches over and takes my hand in his. My whole body vibrates with happiness and for the first time, I find it hard to concentrate on the film on the screen. My attention keeps being drawn back to Sasha, who softly narrates interesting history and trivia about *It's a Wonderful Life* to me while we watch. I knew he was passionate about movies but seeing him like this is beautiful. When he's talking about something he loves, he lights up brighter than a solar flare and it makes him utterly mesmerizing.

The whole two hours of the movie, Sasha never lets go of my hand.

As we reach the heartwarming conclusion, I can't help but tear up like I always do. Even Sasha gives a suspicious sniffle or two.

When the lights go up and the credits roll, Sasha turns to me with a soft smile. "Now that's a Christmas movie I actually enjoy."

My tentacles curl with happiness. "I'm so glad."

Sasha stretches and I swallow hard at the beautiful lines of his body on display.

I clear my throat awkwardly. "Let me get your film ready." I hurry over to the control panel again and cue things up before I rejoin Sasha.

The lights go down as our second feature starts playing. My eyes widen as I realize it's another black-and-white film.

I eye Sasha who waggles his eyebrows at me. "Seems like we're on the same wavelength tonight."

"*Casablanca*?"

"Have you seen it before?" Sasha asks.

I shake my head. "I've heard of it. It's considered quite famous, isn't it?"

"One of the greatest films of the twentieth century, for sure." He shifts uneasily in his seat. "I thought you might like it since it has a love story."

My hearts start pounding.

This time, I reach out and take his hand, reveling in the sensation of his warm skin against mine.

No matter how tempting Sasha is, I find I'm soon drawn into the world of the story on screen. By the time it ends, I'm openly weeping.

"Oh god. I didn't mean to make you cry," Sasha says, looking at me with a horrified expression as the lights come up.

I wipe furiously at my eyes and sniffle. "It's not your fault. The story was just so moving. Poor Rick and Ilsa. Their love was ruined by war."

Sasha reaches up to gently wipe tears from my wet cheeks. "They may not have had forever together, but at least they'll always have Paris."

My bottom lip trembles. "But they deserved so much more! They love each other and yet they can't be together."

Sasha pulls me into a hug, and I go willingly, melting into his embrace. "Not every love story ends like those in a Hallmark movie, sweetie."

"They should," I say stubbornly.

Sasha chuckles. "There can be beauty in tragedy and loss. For them, it was about having a short, magical time together that they'll never forget."

I sigh. "I can see your point, even if I don't like it."

He snorts. "Well, who knows? Maybe an even greater love awaits poor Rick."

I pull back and gaze into his eyes intently. "What do you mean?"

His answering grin makes my hearts start racing again. "Perhaps Rick and Captain Renault will become lovers."

The more I consider it, the more the idea grows on me. "Now that is an intriguing possibility. After all, they do share a unique connection between them."

“And their banter is fucking sexy,” Sasha adds.

I nod. “Plus, Renault basically ensures Rick doesn’t get arrested for the murder he committed. As a man of the law, he must care for Rick to compromise his professional principles. I like the idea of them starting a romance together in Casablanca.”

Sasha grins. “The whole beautiful friendship business is totally code, man.” He pats one of my tentacles. “I’m also fairly certain there’s slash fanfiction of Rick and Louis Renault out there on the interwebs. We’ll definitely search some out.”

I’m not sure what he means by that but before I can ask a sudden idea overtakes me and I jump up, racing over to the control panel.

“Whoa! What’s going on?” Sasha asks.

“As Time Goes By” starts playing over the speakers.

I return to Sasha, giving him a formal bow and holding out my hand in invitation. “Would you do me the honor of this dance?”

He studies me for a long moment before reaching out and taking my hand.

Is it my imagination or do I detect a faint tremble to his grip?

Taking him into my arms, I maneuver us toward the open space in front of the first row of seats and begin to dance with him. We sway in time to the music and part of me wishes we could stay like this forever, in each other’s arms.

Sasha rests his head against my chest with a sigh. “You’re a true romantic, aren’t you?”

I wasn’t until I met you.

All of my attention is focused on the irresistible Earthling who has captured my hearts in such a short time. My tentacles writhe with uncertainty, but I know I have to lay out all my cards.

“I’ll be completely honest. I know we haven’t known each other long, but I care about and am deeply attracted to you, Sasha.”

He leans closer toward me, a sensual look on his face as he invades my space. “I like you too, Tentacle Boy.”

I swallow nervously. “But I’m aware that I abducted you from Earth. I have promised to take you back, and I mean every word of that promise.”

Sasha frowns. “So, what’s the problem?”

My tentacles flail. “What if you’re only responding to me because you feel you must? I don’t want to take advantage of you.”

Sasha gives me a look that tells me he thinks I’m a few planets short of a solar system. “Let’s get something straight.” There’s a sassy note in his voice that I’m beginning to adore. “I don’t do anything I don’t want to. And I sure as shit don’t get my freak on with anyone I’m not interested in. If you were a douche canoe trying to bribe me into having sex with you in exchange for taking me back home, I’d kick your ass and find some other way to return to Earth.” He reaches out and takes hold of one of my tentacles, his expression softening. “But you’re not forcing me into something I don’t want. I’m a very willing participant.” He swallows. “I’m more drawn to you than anyone I’ve ever known—and I’m sick of fighting what I’m feeling. We only have a short time together and I don’t want to waste it.”

It’s like he’s mirroring my feelings with his words.

“I would never hurt you,” I assure him. “Intimacy must always be consensual and enjoyable. If we become lovers, I want to bring you pleasure and care for you and help meet your needs.”

Sasha’s gray eyes bore into mine, searching. “You wear your heart”—his lips twitch—“or rather, *hearts*, on your sleeve.”

I give a soft chuckle. “We say we wear our hearts on our tentacles, but yes, I understand you.”

Sasha grins. “Well, I can tell your hearts are pure, much more so than mine. But I want to spend more time with you while we can.” He gives me a saucy wink. “And that includes spending some sexy times together as well. I’ve never had sex with an extraterrestrial before, but I’m fully on board to try.”

My dick and tentacles throb in enthusiastic endorsement of that idea, but I still hold back, biting my lip. I’m torn between doing the honorable thing and indulging in our mutual desires.

“I would feel better if I didn’t hold all the power in this situation,” I admit. “If we’re going to be intimate with one another, as you’re suggesting, I want us to be able to come together on equal footing.”

He smiles. “This is why I know you’re a good guy, Khephren.” He thinks about my suggestion for a moment. “On my planet, we have legal contracts. Would something like that, making our agreement binding in a more official manner, help at all?”

My Earthling is brilliant.

“Yes, a contract might be just the thing!” I let go of Sasha, ignoring the semi in my pants and grateful that I chose loose-fitting ones, and return to the control panel on the wall. A quick search enables me to pull up a contract template that I display on the big screen. I opt for a very simple contract that I quickly fill in.

Sasha looks up at the screen and begins to read the single-page document with me.

On this star date of 47634.49, Party A (Khephren Thrase of Draveth) and Party B (Sasha Vasiliev of Earth) agree to the following terms: At the end of the Earth holiday known as Christmas in the human year 2023, Party A will return Party B to the exact location on Earth where Party B was picked up. Safe return to this destination will happen within no more than five business days after Christmas in Earth time. If Party A fails to fulfill this agreed-upon duty, they will forfeit their ship, the Sleigh Belle, and all goods therein to

Party B and shall provide them with an Alliance navigator to take Party B home.

Sasha turns to me in utter shock. “You’d give up your ship and everything in it?”

I nod solemnly. “Even the Augmented Reality Simulation Environment, my passion project that will likely be worth a fortune someday.”

Sasha shakes his head. “I want your ass, not your ARSE.”

I frown. “What?”

“Nothing. Inside joke.” He smiles. “I know how much your ship means to you. It’s your freedom.”

I let out the breath I’d been holding. He truly understands me.

“It is. However, I wanted to show you just how serious I am when it comes to us.”

“What do we do with this contract? Let’s make this official so we can get back to making out like I’d planned.”

I try not to choke, and my cock plumps up at his words. “Once...once we’ve both signed it, I will submit it to the ship’s record as well as the intergalactic cloud registry. We both get a digital copy to keep.” Then I add, “To ensure the contract is upheld, I will provide you with a communicator that can be used to contact the Intergalactic Alliance of Neutral Alien Lifeforms should I fail to follow through on my end of the bargain. If you contact them, they will send someone to rescue you and I will forfeit my ship to you as a consequence.”

Sasha takes a deep breath before his eyes gaze into mine, piercing my very soul. “I trust you, Khephren Thrase. I haven’t trusted anyone in a long time, but you make me want to open my heart again.”

I bring him over to the control panel and with bold, decisive movements, he uses his finger to sign his name to the contract.

I mimic his gesture and sign my name to it as well before I quickly submit it to the ship's record and intergalactic cloud registry. I send a digital copy to the private computer in his room.

Still overcome by his words, I swallow thickly. "I am honored by your trust in me, and I will not break it." One of my tentacles gently takes hold of his hand and brings it to my lips. I brush a gentle kiss against his knuckles. "You're very special to me, Sasha. I promise to protect your heart and reward your trust in me."

"I said it before, and I'll say it again. You're a true romantic, aren't you?"

I take a leap of faith and decide to be completely honest. "When it comes to you, I am."

He fans himself. "Fucking hell, Tentacle Boy! Your whole gallant and courtly routine is getting me seriously hot and bothered." His eyes narrow and he growls, "It's also making me want to utterly corrupt you."

My tentacles dance in complete agreement with that plan.

Sasha begins to move backward, curling his finger at me. "Come, join me," he purrs in a tone that sends shivers racing to the tips of my tentacles.

Are we really going to do this?

While my body screams, "Yes, yes, yes!" my brain pummels me with new worries.

Sasha and I haven't talked about anything beyond this short time we have together, even though I'm already starting to want so much more.

But I can't force that.

If this is the only time I get to spend with Sasha, just like Rick and Ilsa in *Casablanca*, I must make the most of it.

I straighten my shoulders and stride toward him.

We meet in a flurry of limbs—I do have quite a few more than he does, after all—and passionate kisses.

Sasha may be smaller than me, but he has a surprising strength. He latches on to me like a space leech, clinging to me with his legs around my hips and his arms around my neck, as is his way.

His lips against mine feel so right, like coming home, only to a home I've never known but have secretly been searching for all my life. As his tongue delves inside my mouth and we taste and explore one another, I feel my libido raging to the surface again.

Our kissing is wild and electric. My cock immediately goes from interested to rock-hard and ready.

We tumble into one of the reclining theater seats and I'm surprised to find myself on the bottom as Sasha straddles my lap with a grin. His dark hair is mussed because my tentacles were fondling his head while we kissed and I had barely noticed, I was so absorbed in the meeting of our mouths.

"I need to touch you," Sasha declares, his eyes fiery with desire.

I revel in the assertiveness and confidence he shows in this moment. He is a man who knows what he wants. It turns me on even more.

"Yes, that," I rasp out. My tentacles surge forward to caress and pet him.

He glances toward the door. "How private is this theater?"

I blink through the fog of lust clouding my vision. "Only I have the passcode to get in."

Sasha's answering grin is more of a leer. "Excellent."

He leans down again and kisses me, owning my mouth with a passion I've never experienced with a partner before. I've had a number of lovers over the years, of course, but none of them have ever made me feel like Sasha does. They were all attractive, and I had a good time with them, but I didn't experience the same kind of magical spark that I do with this man from another world.

Sasha lights me up inside in ways I thought were only possible in the realm of fantasies and fairy tales.

My hands trail down his back until I reach the edge of his tunic and I slip my hands under the fabric to make contact with his warm, silky skin. The tips of my fingers tingle at the touch and my tentacles shudder with need.

Sasha moans into my mouth, his tongue tangling with mine. With lightning speed, he pulls back with a gasp and scrabbles at the edges of his tunic to pull it over his head and fling it to the floor with a triumphant shout.

I stop and stare at his beautiful, lean body, taking it all in.

To my amazement and delight, his chest and stomach are lightly furred with a smattering of dark hair matching that on his head. I've seen this in some human movies before, but never on anyone in real life.

With careful movements, I reach out curious fingers and run them through the hair in awe. It's surprisingly soft and reminds me of the pelt of a cute, small furry animal from my planet called a *chibli*.

Sasha, my very own *chibli*. Not that I'll ever tell him that as I intuitively know he wouldn't be pleased with the comparison.

Unaware of my thoughts, he studies me. "Do you like men with hairy chests?"

I peer up into his eyes. "It is the first time I have encountered a partner with chest hair." I've had partners with scales and feathers on their chests, but not hair. With total fascination, I stroke the soft thatch before me. "I think I like it."

Sasha grins. "Good, because I sure as shit wasn't going to shave it." He cocks his head and considers me. "I take it you don't have hair on your chest?"

I shake my head. "We do not have hair on our bodies except for our heads."

He licks his lips again and looks pointedly at my chest. “I’ve shown you mine, so now it’s your turn to show me yours.”

Grinning, I have my tentacles remove my shirt in one fluid movement.

Sasha gazes hungrily at my naked torso.

While he takes in his fill, I send two tentacles out to delicately trace the ridges of his pectorals, his slightly soft abdomen, and his dusky, rose-colored nipples.

“What do you want tonight?” I ask, my voice hoarse with desire.

Sasha begins to circle and grind his pelvis against mine, and I feel the hard ridge of his erection brushing against my own. He licks his lips again. “I want you to jack us off together while I blow one of your tentacles. How does that sound?”

I let out a strangled noise, trying not to come in my pants.

“That sounds like heaven to me.”

He grins and begins to unbutton his pants, and I hasten to follow.



Chapter Thirteen

Meeting different species is common practice when exploring the universe. While neural linguistic translators make basic communication easier across species, recognizing and grasping the subtle cultural differences among different beings is often far more difficult. Keep an open mind and read body language. Sometimes physical reactions convey far more than words can.

—The Lonely Universe Guide to Space Travel for Beginners

SASHA

Nat King Cole begins crooning “When I Fall in Love” in the background as I shimmy out of my clothes. *Swoon!*

How the fuck did Khephren know I have a secret soft spot for black-and-white movies and old love songs? I blame it all on my baba. She and I used to watch the Turner Classic Movies channel every day after I came home from school. Baba would make us tea and cookies, and we’d indulge in an era long gone by.

No wonder I’m getting all sentimental right now. It’s the childhood memories with my grandmother. That’s all.

Yeah, right.

Fortunately, I’m mostly able to shove my complicated feelings aside when Khephren distracts me by pulling the waistband of his loose-flowing pants under his hips to reveal his big, bright pink erection.

I stare at it. His cock is certainly more colorful than the average human’s but otherwise similar. He’s a good size and

girth, but he doesn't have some massive monster cock that could split me in two. With appropriate prep, I'm confident he'll fill me up just right.

I bite back a giggle. Am I seriously having a Goldilocks moment about alien dicks right now?

Then I look closer and do a double take. Khephren's cock doesn't appear to have a foreskin but is instead lined with a series of ridges and bumps.

I swallow. "Uh...those things on your cock are different."

He scrutinizes my own erection, which looks downright ghostly it's so pale in comparison to his.

"Yours is very smooth. You do not have pleasure nodules?"

I squint. "Is that a joke or is that seriously what you call them?"

"I am very serious. They're so named because they can bring greater ecstasy to a partner when they rub against sensitive interior linings of the body."

Fuck me sideways.

With pleasure nodules.

My asshole clenches at the thought of his ribbed-for-my-pleasure cock inside me. I *need* to know what those funky nodules feel like.

But we can build up to that.

Khephren takes hold of one of his tentacles and massages the tip until it starts to glisten with a slick substance that he coats his hand with liberally.

"Get the fuck out!" I can't hide my amazement. "Do you have self-lubricating tentacles?"

"Of course. How else would one use them in sexual activities?"

Sweet motherfucking Jesus.

I swallow back some drool. “Well, that’s really damn convenient—”

My words trail off in a high-pitched moan when Khephren wraps his big, slick hand around his cock and mine and begins to rub our erections together with firm, sure strokes.

Barely holding on to my faculties, I grab that slippery tentacle of his in my hand and jack it.

Khephren jerks in response and I grin.

“Like that?”

“Yes,” he growls.

I study the wet tip. “Is it safe?”

He frowns. “What do you mean?”

“Do I need to worry about extraterrestrial sexual diseases or infections?”

“No, we eradicated such things millennia ago. So have most other space traveling species.”

Humanity is definitely behind the rest of the universe then. “Okay, well we haven’t done that on Earth yet. Just so you know, I got tested after my last hookup months ago and I was negative for everything.”

Khephren uses his free hand to stroke my face. “I know. When the tractor beam picked you up, you were automatically scanned for any illness. I would not be able to take an ill human aboard my ship due to quarantine protocols that are mandatory for all vessels, but it would also be dangerous to take someone away from the medical support systems designed to treat them.”

I don’t know how to feel about being scanned in such a manner, even though I had no idea it was happening at the time, but I can understand why this is a standard protocol on ships.

Honestly, right now I’m far more enthusiastic about the fact that we are both able to swap bodily fluids safely.

“So I can suck on this bad boy to my heart’s content without any worries?” I ask.

Khephren gulps and stutters. “Y-yes.”

Ooh! I love knowing I can have this kind of effect on him.

Firming my grip on the squirming tentacle—he’s a slippery little sucker—I bring the dark pink tip to my mouth and flick my tongue out to taste it.

Khephren throws his head back as my tongue circles the tip of his eager, quivering tentacle.

It’s smoother and more malleable than an erect penis, but no less fun to play with. Slimmer at the tip, the shaft of his tentacle widens progressively as it gets closer to the base. From where I hold it, I squeeze firmly, and his tentacle responds by vibrating in a way that immediately makes me wonder what that will feel like inside my ass.

And against my prostate.

Fuck yeah. I *will* make that happen.

As my tongue laps at the slick natural lubricant at his tip, I savor the taste of him. He’s slightly sweet and almost floral. Definitely better than most of the lubes I’ve had to buy over the years. Talk about convenient!

I pull back and lick my lips. “Yummy. You taste good, Tentacle Boy.”

Khephren’s eyes narrow. “You are pure temptation and you know it, don’t you?”

My answering grin is wholly unrepentant, and I shrug.

He grunts. “Two can play at this game.” He gives me a cocky grin as his large hand, currently wrapped around both our cocks, pumps up and down on them.

“Holy fuck!” I cry out, my hips jerking in time with his movements.

Those pleasure nodules of his are the real deal. Much like his tentacles, they vibrate, and the feel of them against the

underside of my cock and my sensitive head is pure ecstasy. It makes me worried I could bust my nut entirely too soon.

Redoubling my efforts to drive Khephren equally wild, I pull his eager tentacle to my mouth and go down on it with gusto. After all, he wanted equals in the bedroom, and I can give as good as I get!

“Dear galactic gods!” His body stiffens and then shudders all over. His tentacle wriggles in my mouth and does erotic battle with my tongue as I lave and suck on it, hollowing my cheeks and taking as much of it into my throat as I possibly can before pulling back and doing it all over again.

My hunch was totally right. At least some of Khephren’s tentacles are sexually sensitive. I make a note of the characteristics of this self-lubricating tentacle because I have some plans for it in other parts of my body very, very soon.

As I continue to fellate his tentacle, Khephren increases the speed with which he jerks us off.

Damn if we don’t fit together like pieces of a puzzle, two halves of a whole. Fuck. I know it’s cheesy as hell, but I entirely blame it on Khephren since he’s rubbing off on me. Heh. Both literally and figuratively.

It’s terrifying and wonderful all at the same time.

With such incredible pleasure rolling through my body, I can’t hold out for long. I grit my teeth when my balls start to draw up. “I’m close.”

Khephren gasps, “Me too.”

Feeling my orgasm barreling down on me, I let go of his tentacle to wrap my arms around Khephren’s neck again, thrusting my hips in time with his movements.

It happens so fast.

One minute, I’m straining for the peak and the next I’m flying, my cock spurting my release as I shout my pleasure into the theater, momentarily drowning out the music in the background.

I collapse against Khephren's gorgeous chest, practically purring with satisfaction. Sweaty and panting, I revel in the groan that rumbles long and loud through the body beneath me when he joins me seconds later. The wet heat of his release trickles down my softening cock and all the way to my balls.

Ordinarily, I'd find that a bit gross and want to clean myself off right away. But as I'm discovering, everything is different when I'm with Khephren. Instead of racing off to wash up and ditch my hookup du jour, I snuggle in as he wraps his tentacles around me.

Why the ever-loving hell does that feel so natural? So fucking right.

I brush aside the answer my brain supplies. There's no way I can even begin to deal with that right now.

Khephren lifts his come-covered hand to his mouth and licks his fingers clean.

I moan. "Why is that so fucking hot? Also, not fair! I may be young, but I can't get it up again right away, even if I want to." I pant. "Give me a couple minutes."

Khephren chuckles and pulls me tighter against him. "I'm perfectly content to hold you in my arms for the rest of the night. What we shared already was perfect and truly magical."

Normally, I'd say something sarcastic to a comment like that. A honed defense mechanism to keep my distance. But with Khephren, I can't. His words touch me deep inside and resonate because I know they're true. I feel the same.

I bury my face into his chest and inhale his heady, comforting scent—so unlike any human I've ever been with but distinctly Khephren.

I'll miss this when I have to go home. My heart quails at the thought. When I was first abducted, all I could think of was returning to LA but making the most of my time here for creative inspiration. Now I don't even know. What do I even have waiting for me back on Earth?

Nothing and no one.

I shove such troubling thoughts aside, not wanting to ruin my postcoital glow.

Instead, I indulge in something I've wanted to do from almost the first moment I met him. I reach up and take hold of some unbraided strands of Khephren's lovely dark pink hair, which he clearly styled for this date, and loosely run it through my fingers. It's silky and shimmers a little in the faint light of the theater.

I've already accepted that pink is my new favorite color.

"Have I told you how beautiful your hair is?"

Khephren shakes his head, a bashful look on his face.

Seriously, his cuteness knows no bounds.

I let go of his hair and cup his cheek. "It's beautiful. Just like you."

Khephren's eyes flutter shut as he nuzzles his cheek into my hand, not unlike a cat. It hasn't taken me long to realize just how tactile Khephren is. He, and especially his tentacles, actively seeks to touch and explore me whenever he can. On the flip side, I'm suddenly aware that he desires the same in return.

I make a silent vow to touch him as often as possible over the next few weeks.

His eyes open and look into mine, their swirling kaleidoscope of colors a mirror of the diverse colors in the universe. "You are beautiful to me too, Sasha."

Khephren's words are a healing balm to the tattered remains of my heart.

He's going to own it all by the time I have to leave, but I'm okay with that. I can't imagine anyone else in this vast universe I'd be willing to give my heart to other than him.

We kiss again, slow and tender now that our passion has been sated.

I knew other gay men in college who were all about kissing, but I never understood why. It always seemed

slobbery, a bit awkward, and entirely unnecessary in the process of getting off.

Yet now I could kiss Khephren for days, exploring every inch of his mouth, tasting and absorbing his essence, making him mine. I want to burn these memories into my brain so I can turn to them for comfort when I'm on my own again.

After all, our time together is finite. A few short weeks and then he'll be gone from my life forever.

I ignore the painful ache in my chest and twisting sensation in my gut.

As we lie there in each other's arms with Khephren's romantic music selections playing in the background, a small, secret part of me wonders if Santa would give me Khephren Thrase for this and every other Christmas to come.



Chapter Fourteen

Privately Relayed Intergalactic Communication and Knowledge System (PRICKS)

Stardate: 47634.50

DataMaster: *flailing tentacle emoji* Help! I'm falling in love with my fake fiancé!

EatMyCometDust: Uh, dude, that's been obvious for a while. Are you only just realizing it???

NebulaNerd: Sigh. I was afraid of this.

DrWhoDaFuck: I'm so happy for you both! True love always triumphs, just like the Earthling movies say.

DataMaster: Well, I'm not sure if he reciprocates my feelings or not.

EatMyCometDust: @DataMaster have you told him?

DataMaster: *sad tentacle emoji* Not yet. I don't want to put pressure on him.

NebulaNerd: That is very honorable. You did abduct the poor Earthling, after all. He must be the one to make a move.

DataMaster: *blushing tentacle emoji* He initiated physical intimacies and things are so perfect and effortless between us when it comes to sex.

EatMyCometDust: Sex is easy. Emotions are hard, bro. For what it's worth, I think you should just be honest and tell him how you feel.

DrWhoDaFuck: Just remember, you have a limited window of opportunity here. If words are hard, perhaps start with actions.

DataMaster: Exactly what I was thinking! I want to help him make amazing memories during our time together.

EatMyCometDust: *sniffles* I'm rooting for you kids! You give me hope that there's someone out there for all of us.

KHEPHREN

Over the next few days, Sasha and I spend as much time together as possible. Not all of it is spent in luxurious make-out sessions like the one in my theater, but we do enjoy some of that as well. I'm pleased to learn that, while he and I both enjoy indulging in one another's bodies, we also have our own creative projects we want to spend time working on.

Sasha's enthusiasm for his film work matches my own about computer programming. Lately, he's been quite busy writing a script for the project he wants to film in my Augmented Reality Simulation Environment. While he's been secretive about the details of the script and the roles we all will play, he has given me the basic details of the world he wants me to create.

I have found the project a fun break from other things I've been working on. Honestly, it was child's play to code what he wants, and I can't wait for him to see it! Once it was done, I was able to sit him down and pepper him with questions about Christmas to help me with a very special simulation sequence that I'm keeping secret from everyone. Originally, it was for me but now I am designing every feature with Sasha in mind. It will be my final gift to him before I must return him to Earth.

I want to give Sasha memories he will never forget.

My attempt at decorating the ship certainly seems to have softened his heart toward me, but I don't believe his Christmas spirit has rekindled just yet. However, I'm bound and determined to make it happen, whatever I have to do.

Sitting down with Najar, Luna, and Rambo for lunch one day, I decide to lay out my new plan while Sasha is hard at work on his script in his room. He claims he needs quiet and privacy to think, so he spends a lot of time in there when he's writing. It's also providing me with the perfect opportunity right now to get my friends' support for what I want to do for the man I can't stop thinking about.

I sigh dreamily, recalling this morning.

Sasha slept over in my room last night and we thoroughly pleased one another both before bed and again when we woke up. It was heavenly. We haven't progressed to full intercourse yet, but I have no complaints. Simply being with him, touching him and bringing him pleasure, fills me with contentment and joy. My tentacles sway happily at my many fond recollections from the last few days.

"You have the dopey look of a Dravethian in love written all over your face, Kheph," Luna says with a smirk as she digs into her bowl of food.

I come out of my reverie. "Is it really that obvious?"

Najar snorts. "More than just a little."

I can't even begin to deny it. Falling for Sasha is happening faster than the speed of light. If I'm brutally honest with myself, my heart already belongs to him but I'm not ready to voice the words. I don't want to ruin the equilibrium we've found with one another. We are finally on the same wavelength, and I don't dare disrupt that.

"Sasha is special. I want to know everything about him."

Luna gives me a soft smile. "He's perfect for you, and vice versa. Everyone can see that. I called it before, but it's totally destiny. Trust me."

My shoulders slump. "We haven't talked about anything beyond the duration of his originally planned stay."

Najar frowns. "Don't wait too long. You need to have an open conversation with him. If you don't share your wishes, he'll never know."

I wince. “Uh...that might be kind of hard since we signed a contract.”

Najar goes stiller than stone. “You did what?”

Luna abandons her food and races to the computer interface on the wall in the kitchen. In seconds, she’s pulled up the brief contract. Her eyes widen and her mouth drops open as she reads it.

She whirls on me. “You promised him our fucking ship?!”

“What?” Najar roars.

“I see. You’re very foolish. The true sign of a hero,” Rambo adds with a series of amused beeps.

I cover my ears with two tentacles. “Calm down. I only forfeit the Sleigh Belle if I don’t follow through on my promise to take him home. Much as I would like to keep him here with us, I would never force that on him, or anyone else for that matter. I made such a big gesture to persuade him that I was serious about him and not trying to take advantage.” I feel my cheeks warm. “I would not have been comfortable pursuing physical intimacies with him had I not evened the playing field.”

Luna’s tentacles twist and wring. “It was kind of a dick move to us, your friends. You didn’t even consult with us. If we lose this ship, we’re fucked, plain and simple. We’ll have to go back to Draveth.”

“I’m sorry. I made a rash decision, I know.”

“You were thinking with your dick and your tentacles,” Najar growls.

I can’t deny that. “Look, you know I would never violate a contract like this. I’m a Dravethian of his word. I made Sasha a promise, and I intend to fulfill it unless he tells me otherwise. While I do want to tell him how I feel, I also don’t want to pressure him into staying. For now, I will leave it to him to tell me if he wishes to remain with us.”

Rambo whirls in a circle as he beeps. “We are all fools in love.”

Isn't that the truth.

Luna looks as if she's going to object, but I cut her off. "I invited you both to lunch because I need advice. Humans have a tradition known as the Twelve Days of Christmas, when they give a loved one twelve different, albeit rather odd, gifts leading up to the actual day. While I don't have the ability to replicate that, especially since it involves some animals indigenous to Earth, I thought it might be better to give him twelve gifts all at once."

Luna's eyebrows nearly reach her hairline. "Are you talking about what I think you're talking about?"

I grin. "I want us to go to the Nirvana Nebulas." I hurry on as they stare at me. "They're on my bucket list already, and they're supposed to offer the most beautiful vistas in space on this side of the universe. I want to share that with Sasha." Then I add sheepishly, "And you two, as well."

"Always so nice to be an afterthought," Najar says in his usual dry, droll voice.

In contrast, Luna's irritation from earlier vanishes and she clutches her hands to her chest. "What a wonderful idea. And so romantic! Surely he will understand your feelings if you give him such an amazing gift."

I squirm in my seat. "That's not why I'm doing it. Even if this short period of time is all I get with Sasha, I want to give him as many beautiful memories as I can so that he'll always remember his time with us after he leaves." I swallow hard. "I know I'll never forget him."

There is a shimmer of understanding in Najar's eyes as he studies me. "You're pulling out all the stops, aren't you? You're growing more serious about him every day."

I hold his gaze and nod. "I've never been more serious about anyone in my entire life." If I had my way, Sasha would stay with me forever, but I can't force him to leave behind everything he knows and everyone he loves to be with me.

Firm in my purpose, I hurriedly finish my lunch and head back to the bridge. There, I input the new coordinates for our

upcoming destination. I'm giddy inside at the prospect of showing this wonder of the universe to Sasha. I haven't even seen it before myself; I've only heard of its glory. But I want to witness his reaction even more than I want to see the actual nebulas.

I activate the com system and make an announcement throughout the ship. "Okay, friends. I need to activate light speed to get us started on the next leg of our journey. Wherever you're at, please make sure to sit down and hold tight. There'll be a little bit of a jolt as we get going, but things will smooth out after that. Enjoy the ride!"

"Buckle up, it's going to be a bumpy night," Rambo, who followed me, adds.

I get everything ready to enter light speed and within moments we're zipping across the universe on the way to the Nirvana Nebulas. Once the ride becomes smoother, I leave Rambo to monitor the bridge and make my way to Sasha's room.

When he opens the door my mind stalls at the sight of him wearing black rectangular-framed glasses. They make him look even more adorable—and I didn't think that was possible!

My tentacles flail, unable to contain themselves.

I'm embarrassed that I can't control them better around him, but I suppose that's what happens when you fall in love. I remember some of my mother's stories about my father and how she knew his feelings for her were real because she could read them in his tentacles.

Being human, Sasha probably can't detect such things, but I don't try to hide my ardor.

"You wear glasses?" I can't hold back the dreamy note in my voice.

To my surprise, Sasha blushes. He's far less likely to be embarrassed than I am, but I'm amused when he hastily takes them off and runs a hand through his hair.

“Yeah, they’re just reading glasses, but I need them when I’m working on the computer.” He cringes. “I know I look horribly nerdy in them.”

My tentacles fly out and begin petting his arms and his face in reassurance. “No! You look wonderful, as always.” I smile. “I just like seeing these other sides of you.”

Sasha pats one of my tentacles, his touch sending that same zing of awareness through me, before inviting me into the room.

My eyes immediately land on Jonesy, who is sprawled out on a table, looking out the panoramic window at the view of space as the universe zips by. As always, she is infinitely regal and distinguished. Just seeing her gives me renewed hope. Surely Thekmis would not have sent her to us with Sasha if they weren’t meant to be with us?

Sasha turns to me with a frown. “Is it just me, or is Jonesy putting on weight?”

I was so focused on the majesty of this divine creature that I didn’t notice, but now that he mentions it, she does seem a bit...fuller figured? “She is as beautiful as always but does look somewhat plumper than when she first arrived. Is that of concern to you?”

Sasha’s frown deepens. “I don’t know. I’m not a vet. But I know it’s not good for animals to gain too much weight too quickly, just the same way as it isn’t for humans. Do you think your food generator could have made an error in recreating her kibble? Perhaps it’s increasing the caloric density or fat content of the food?”

The very thought has me on alert. I do not wish to harm Jonesy. She is a beautiful, noble creature.

Also, I don’t wish to earn the anger of Thekmis. I need all the good luck I can get right now.

“Let me check.” I head over to the generator and do some calibrations.

Sasha gives me a piece of the kibble at my request, and I have the device do an analysis of its composition in

comparison to the sample we introduced when we made more.

To my relief, the system notifies me that their composition is as close in similarity as possible, particularly in terms of vitamins, minerals, calories, and fat content. Although the generator could not replicate some of the animal proteins included in the kibble exactly, it was able to utilize fairly close substitutes.

I explain all of this to Sasha, and he nods. “I’ll keep an eye on her. She’s definitely been a little bit more lazy than usual lately. Maybe some of it’s the fact that she hasn’t been getting as much exercise?”

“If you are truly concerned, we can have our med lab perform a more involved internal scan.”

“What, like an MRI?”

“What is that?”

He explains it to me, and I nod. “It would be very similar but faster.”

Sasha considers this. “Wasn’t she scanned along with me when we came on the ship? You said the tractor beam scanned me for diseases.”

“Yes, but it only assesses for indicators of communicable illnesses, nothing else. It would require a more involved scan in our med lab to do internal imaging.”

“That makes sense.” He studies Jonesy. “I’ll keep an eye on her and if she keeps gaining weight, then we’ll do the scan. She doesn’t seem to be having any ill effects otherwise. I just don’t want her health to become compromised if she gains too much weight too fast.”

“Of course. We must take good care of Thekmis’s representative.”

Sasha directs an indulgent look at me. “You do realize that there are millions of cats just like Jonesy on my home world? She’s not unique.” He pauses. “I mean, she’s special because she’s Jonesy and she’s kick-ass. We found each other and now

we're buds for life, but we have no Thekmis on our world—and Jonesy sure as hell isn't associated with her.”

I'm not deterred by his words. “There are many mysteries in this universe, my sweet Earthling. It is never wise to be too hasty in assuming you know everything there is to know.”

Sasha rolls his eyes and chuckles. “Fine. If you want to think of Jonesy as a divine incarnation of your goddess, then by all means feel free to do so. I'm sure she will consider you her royal subject and expect to be treated like a queen regardless.”

Before I can respond, an alarm goes off and a computerized voice echoes throughout the room. “Alert—distress signal detected. Alert—distress signal detected.”

Sasha darts a confused look at me. “What's that? What's going on?”

I urge him to follow me as I hastily make my way out of his room and race for the bridge. “It means that someone on our navigation path has emitted a distress signal and is seeking help from any passersby.”

Luna and Najar are hot on our heels and take their posts as I sit in my navigation chair and pull up the information on my screens.

The ship in need appears to be a smaller vessel carrying half a dozen passengers.

“I'm gonna pull up the viewscreen and see if I can communicate with them,” I tell everyone.

After a few moments, the screen flickers and I spot a harried-looking Grelorian on the other end. Her avian face is pinched with stress and her feathers are fluffed out.

I try to put her at ease. “Greetings. I'm Khephren Thrase of the Sleigh Belle. We intercepted your distress signal. Can you explain what's going on?”

Her feathers ruffle and she sighs in relief. “Thank the galactic gods you were passing by! I'm Olgza Nirnu of the Cosmic Phoenix. I'm conveying a group of folks to the

Tentacular Tales Convention, and it seems that our engine is having a problem.”

Luna perks up and rushes over. “Tell me what error messages you’re getting from the system mainframe.”

They spend a few minutes talking and Luna nods along, her gaze intense and focused.

“Ah, I’ve encountered that a lot on the model engine that you have on your vessel. It’s a pretty easy fix, but we’d need to board your ship in order for me to work on it and get you back up and running.”

Olgza’s face slackens in relief. “Of course, you are most welcome on the Cosmic Phoenix. We would be eternally grateful for any assistance you can provide.”

I reroute our navigation again, relieved to see that it won’t take us too far off track to rendezvous with Olgza and her passengers.

“We’ll be there shortly,” I say. “Hold on tight. Everything’s going to be okay.”

Olgza gives me a big smile around her beak. “I’m just relieved that someone passing by was willing to answer our call. We’ll look forward to seeing you soon.”

We end our communication and I take us out of light speed to meet the stranded vessel.

“Does this happen a lot?” Sasha asks curiously.

“There are many travelers in the universe,” Najar explains. “While extraterrestrial technology from space-traveling species is currently much more advanced than that of the people of Earth, it is still possible for equipment to stop working, malfunction, or become defective. In those instances, travelers are reliant upon other passersby to aid them.”

“I suppose you don’t have Triple A out here.” Sasha shivers. “Sounds a bit risky to me.”

“Traveling the universe can be unpredictable, especially in dangerous or uninhabited parts,” I admit.

“Stopping to help strangers could be dicey too. Like picking up a hitchhiker—you don’t know who they are and what their intentions might be.” Sasha chews his lip.

Najar pats the weapon at his side. “That’s why I’m on board the Sleigh Belle. I love Luna and Khephren, but neither of them shows an iota of caution when it comes to strangers. I take my duty of keeping them safe very seriously.”

Luna scoffs and flips one of her pigtailed in irritation, her tentacles rubbing together. “Whatever, Najar. We know you’re a big bad warrior and can kick a bunch of ass. But I’ll have you know that Khephren and I are strategists. We play the long game, and we have the ability to thwart potential dangers as well.”

“Don’t you see? The pen is mightier than the sword,” Rambo adds.

Najar arches an eyebrow and shrugs. “That doesn’t help a whole lot when someone’s coming right at you with a deadly weapon.”

Luna pouts. “Fine, you might have a point there.” She reaches over and pats him with one of her green tentacles. “We’ll keep you around for your brawn, babycakes.”

Sasha throws his head back and laughs. “You guys are a riot.”

I put my hands on my hips and beam at everyone. “Well, my intrepid crew, let’s go and help these folks out. We’re going to give them an almost-Christmas miracle!”



Chapter Fifteen

There is a bit of an unwritten code among all space travelers. If you ever encounter a distress signal, then you are expected to answer it as long as you are able. When problems arise and travelers get stranded, it can prove life-threateningly dangerous. Pay it forward and help others when and where you can so that you better ensure you will find assistance in your own eventual time of need.

—*The Lonely Universe Guide to Space Travel for Beginners*

SASHA

Although I'm still a little anxious inside at the prospect of detouring to help some random extraterrestrials in the middle-of-nowhere outer space, I trust my new companions to handle it. Especially Najar, who will at least take the security protocols seriously.

Before too long, the other ship shows up in the distance, growing larger in our view as we get closer.

Khephren's tentacles fly over the navigation controls as he maneuvers the Sleigh Belle to dock with the stranded vessel. It goes so seamlessly that I can't help but marvel. It's honestly like something out of *Firefly*, only more impressive.

I shift from foot to foot, feeling uncertain. "Should I stay here?" I ask.

Khephren blinks at me in confusion. "Why? Don't you want to meet the travelers we're helping?"

"Do you think they've met a human before? I don't want to freak anyone out."

Khephren laughs. “Have you ever met any extraterrestrial species other than us before?”

He’s got me there. My lips quirk up slightly. “Touché, Tentacle Boy.”

He licks his lips and lowers his voice. “Have I told you I rather enjoy it when you call me that?”

My all-too-eager dick perks up at those words and the sultry look in Khephren’s eyes. I seriously can’t get enough of him. Everything he does turns me on lately.

“Save your sexy-time shenanigans for later, both of you,” Najar warns. “We have work to do.”

Dammit! Khephren has an uncanny ability to make me lose sight of anyone and anything else around me. I know that should freak me the fuck out, but it doesn’t. I’m too contented to care.

Who would have ever imagined being abducted by aliens would make me happier than I’ve ever been? Hell, I’m downright *cheerful* since Khephren and I started hooking up.

Luna joins us, a bag bulging with various tools strapped over one shoulder. She’s practically floating with excitement at the prospect of helping these folks fix their engine.

She turns to her droid, and I still can’t get over how much he looks like a cross between R2-D2 and BB8. “Okay, Rambo, you need to stay here and guard the ship for us. If you haven’t heard from us in sixty minutes, please execute plan Delta-Rescue.”

Rambo beeps several times and twirls in a circle. “As you wish.”

Luna grins and turns to all of us. “All right. Let’s do our good deed to get on Santa’s nice list!”

I roll my eyes and she chortles with amusement.

Luna and Khephren are so serious about this holiday, more than anyone I’ve ever met. It was weird and annoying at first. Now I find I want to indulge them because of how happy they

are about the season. That in and of itself is a freaking Christmas miracle.

I follow them through the open airlock that connects the Sleigh Belle to the Cosmic Phoenix. I'll admit it's pretty freaky knowing that this short channel between our ships is the only thing keeping me from the deadly exterior of outer space.

Also, I don't know how they've created a gravitational field that allows us to walk without floating everywhere, but I very much appreciate it.

I can see how human spacecraft have a long way to go before they catch up with most of the rest of the universe.

The hatch opens with a pressurized hiss and we're greeted by Olgza, a two-legged, bird-like being covered in colorful feathers, on the other side.

She welcomes us warmly. "Thank you, crew of the Sleigh Belle, for answering our distress call. With much gratitude, we welcome you aboard the Cosmic Phoenix."

Spreading her wings, she leads us inside and closes the hatch once again. She does some quick introductions before steering Luna to the engine chamber to start working on the problem.

Six passengers greet us and introduce themselves but most of their names don't register with me because I'm trying to process their distinctly extraterrestrial appearances. I do my best not to stare like some kind of asshole, but it's hard. After all, it's not every day that a human meets sentient beings from other planets!

Thankfully, none of the passengers are insect-like—don't judge, I have a phobia about bugs—or otherwise possess attributes terrifying to the primitive part of my brain.

They're just...different. But then again, they probably feel the same about me.

They also appear to all be friends and explain how they're going to some kind of fan convention.

I'm instantly intrigued.

“A fan convention? I had no idea that was something extraterrestrials would have. They’re very big on my home world, Earth,” I tell them.

One of the passengers—a tall, skinny guy with one eye in the center of his forehead and a mouth similar to a duck-billed platypus—brightens at my words. “We know your home world quite well! That is, we have studied it ever since we learned the author of our favorite intergalactic web serial is from there.”

My mouth drops open, mind furiously trying to imagine what they’re talking about. It could be anyone from Stephen King to Chuck Tingle, for all I know.

“Uh, and what’s that?”

In unison, they shout, “*The Tentacular Tales of Captain Starblade!*”

I stare, open-mouthed.

A human-child-sized alien who looks a bit like an Ewok squints at me. “Surely you are familiar with it? The serial is famous and it’s written by a human.”

What in the AO3 fanfiction is going on here?

“Uh...lots of humans write lots of different stuff. As a species, we love telling stories. Always have. From oral traditions, to literature, to film, to video games, and beyond. We’re a storytelling species, that’s for sure.” I shrug. “I’m afraid I’ve never heard of this particular one though.”

A two-headed alien covered in scales gasps, a scandalized look on both faces. “You’ve never heard of *The Tentacular Tales of Captain Starblade* and yet your lover has tentacles? You’re missing out, Earthling!”

I feel my cheeks flush. Is it so obvious that Khephren and I are lovers?

Of fucking course it is.

“Do you perhaps know of River Sullivan?” the furry Ewok-like one asks.

“Uh...no?”

They all gasp in unison again.

“To be fair,” I explain, “there are several billion humans on Earth. It’s unlikely I’d know him personally.”

The one-eyed guy nods. “Understandable. I do not know any humans personally. Apart from now you.” He bows. “It is a pleasure to be meeting you.”

The two-headed alien gives a dreamy sigh. “It’s such a shame you don’t know River Sullivan. We’re all huge fans of his. He’s quite famous across the universe.”

“I’ve been reading his story since he published his very first chapter,” an alien with three arms on each side of his body says softly.

The others ooh and ahh, clearly impressed by this fact.

“So, what is this story about?” The name is certainly provocative, but surely it doesn’t mean what I think it means.

They immediately start talking over one another as everyone tries to give me a breakdown. As far as I can tell, it’s a sexy adventure series involving a tentacled semi-villain named Lord Vardox and his enemies-to-lovers dynamic with the human Captain Starblade.

“Lord Vardox is so dreamy,” the two-headed alien blurts out.

“I’m more of a Starblade fan,” the one-eyed guy counters.

They bicker over their favorite characters and moments, and I quickly get the real gist of what this ongoing story is all about. I interrupt them. “Let me get this straight. You all are fans of some kind of long-running tentacle-porn serial space opera written by a human?”

“Exactly,” the pseudo-Ewok says. “Why do you think we’re going to the convention?”

“Of course! But it’s so much more than porn,” one-eye explains. “There’s an actual plot to this story—and a true,

enduring love between Lord Vardox and Captain Starblade. They're meant to be together!"

Okay, now I kind of want to read it.

"Seriously. There's a fan convention based on tentacle porn?" I can't hide my amazement.

They share a collective sigh as a group of what I now recognize are superfans.

The two-headed alien blushes. "I've even sent River Sullivan fan mail. His boyfriend in the Alliance, Kai, actually wrote me back! I nearly swooned on the spot." He pulls out a printout of said email and brandishes it with enthusiasm. "I was hoping River and Kai might be at the con so they could sign it for me."

They regale me with more stories about their convention plans and give me information on how to look up this tentacle-porn story on my own, which I fully intend to do when we're back on the Sleigh Belle.

Khephren continues working away on the improvements he's making to the ship's navigation system. When the captain returns from the engine room, they review the changes he's implemented together and her feathers fluff in obvious pleasure.

Najar comes to stand beside me as I regard Khephren happily talking away while his tentacles continue to upgrade the ship's navigation system with the greatest of ease. Talk about multitasking!

"It's remarkable, isn't it?" Najar murmurs softly.

I startle. "What?"

His kaleidoscope eyes search mine. "Khephren and Luna are incredibly kind-hearted, generous souls. It never even occurred to them to think twice about helping those in need. They share their impressive talents to better the lives of others, and for that I deeply admire them."

I give him a wry smile. "Yeah, I know what you mean. I'm not that selfless or trusting. Not anymore."

“In that regard, I believe you and I are similar. I have seen too much of the dark side of others. Thankfully, I was trained to protect and defend. That I can do this for my two closest friends makes me far more fortunate than I ever imagined I would be.”

I study Khephren. “There’s something almost childlike in his unwavering trust when it comes to the intentions of others.”

Najar considers this. “Perhaps to some extent, but Khephren is no fool. Despite his cheerful personality and relentless optimism, he has been hurt and taken advantage of in the past.” He gives a faint growl as if in recollection.

The very idea makes my blood boil, and I clench my fists at my sides.

Evidently, I don’t hide my reaction very well.

“Fear not,” Najar says. “Those who dared to hurt him got their just desserts.” His grin is downright evil.

I shiver. Note to self, do *not* fuck with Najar.

His features soften as he turns a loving gaze back on his best friend. “The truly remarkable thing is that Khephren has never let it get him down or crush his trusting and hopeful nature. He has a strength of character at his core that even I do not match.” Najar shakes his head. “I may have the ‘brawn,’ as Luna suggests, but when it comes to pure strength of will, I suspect Khephren surpasses us all.”

I chuckle. “When you think about it, he had to have serious balls to plan and execute such a daring escape from his own wedding.”

“Indeed. I honestly don’t know if Luna and I would have been brave enough to leave Draveth if Khephren hadn’t been leading the way.”

“I’m sure he needs you both just as much as you need him. I haven’t known any of you for very long, and even I can tell he loves you both dearly. You’re lucky to be such good friends. I’m envious,” I admit. I’ve never had a close-knit group of friends I could rely on.

Drawn by his irresistible pull on me, I return my attention to Khephren. “He’s one of a kind, all right.”

Najar’s next words knock the breath right out of me. “You know he’s developing serious feelings for you, right? Surely you aren’t blind to that fact.”

Fuck. That’s precisely what I was worried about. And I’m having the same fucking problem.

“I am too. Who the hell wouldn’t? He’s the sweetest, sexiest, most caring guy I’ve ever known.” I fight back unexpected tears that start to blur my vision. “But we only have a short time left together. It would be stupid to let things get any more serious than they already are.” At least that’s what I keep telling myself with increasing desperation.

Najar considers me. “Are you sure your time together must end?”

My brow furrows in irritation. “Christmas will be here and gone before you know it. I’ve been tracking the days. Khephren’s taking me home after the holiday is over.”

Najar strokes his chin thoughtfully. “Just because you agreed upon a date of return doesn’t mean you have to abide by it.”

I still all over, my ears ringing at his words. I’ve never even let myself contemplate what he’s suggesting because I haven’t wanted to get my hopes up about something that feels so impossible. “What?” I croak out.

He shrugs. “There are other options to consider.”

“We signed a contract,” I explain, grasping at denial straws.

Najar’s mouth quirks into a faint smirk and I know I’m doing a shit job in that department. “Contracts can be amended. Especially should you decide to stay with us permanently.”

I inhale sharply as the words *stay* and *permanently* echo in my mind.

Surely the Sleigh Belle's crew wouldn't want me to join them for good. Would they?

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. "Khephren hasn't asked me to stay." I keep my voice low so the Tentacle Boy in question doesn't hear.

Najar turns his gaze back to his friend, who thankfully remains unaware of our conversation.

"Perhaps he doesn't feel it is his place to speak of such things. After all, he was the one to abduct you from your planet. He would not want to unduly pressure you into making a decision just to please him or for fear he wouldn't take you back."

I scowl. "I'm no pushover. No one pressures me into anything." I cross my arms and glare at him.

Najar nods. "My apologies. I didn't get the impression you were, but my friend's hearts are far too big for his own good. He cares very much about your happiness and ensuring that you do not feel coerced into anything you don't truly want." He sighs. "It probably doesn't help that we, and some of his online friends, cautioned him about getting involved with you from the start. Needless to say, he's a bit confused and conflicted now."

I curse softly under my breath. Khephren's cinnamon-roll ways are endearing and maddening at the same time.

Then the rest of what Najar said sinks in. They told Khephren not to get involved with me? I'm surprisingly hurt by Najar's revelation.

I scowl but Najar raises his hand to stop me from saying anything. "That was before we knew you better—and before we saw you and Khephren together the way that you are now." His eyes soften. "Anyone can see there's something special between you, and I for one want it to work out because you make my best friend happier than anyone ever has—and that's saying something!"

I narrow my eyes at him. "Why are you telling me this?"

Najar crosses his muscular arms. “Because I care very much for Khephren, and I want him to be happy. He wasn’t back on Draveth. But despite all odds, he found you, and you, of all things, make him happy.” He considers me, his gaze assessing. “And I suspect he does the same for you. No matter how you might try to hide it with sarcasm and scowls, you’ve changed since you met Khephren.” He gives me a crooked grin. “My friend does have a tendency to have that effect on others.”

I bite my tongue, unable to deny his claims.

Najar sighs. “Khephren is so worried about influencing your decision by asking you to stay that he remains silent. But I have no such reservations.” His gaze bores into me. “Luna and I have already talked and we agree. We would love to have you join our crew permanently.”

My heart leaps at his words, and a whole new vista of possibilities—ones I haven’t even allowed myself to entertain—begins to unfurl in my mind. What once seemed impossible may be within my grasp.

But I worry that it’s nothing more than a fleeting mirage that will disappear, slipping through my fingers all too fast.

I swallow. “And Khephren? What does he think about me staying?”

Najar smiles. “On that point, I’m afraid you will have to ask him yourself, and you must be the one to start the conversation. He knows abducting you was wrong and now he wants to do right by you, even if it means sacrificing his own happiness.”

Tears prick my eyes. Khephren really is an old-fashioned romantic at heart, and I love that about him. I’m touched that he’s so concerned about how I ended up aboard the Sleigh Belle, but I have no hang-ups over it.

After all, I got over the whole abduction thing ages ago.

Looks like I’m going to have to make the first move this time.

“I know you’re the one making a riskier move here, but if your feelings for my friend are genuine, you owe it to you both to be honest about them before it’s too late. Please be brave enough to talk with him about what you want when the right moment comes along.”

And with that provocative statement, Najjar announces he’s going to check on Luna and strolls off, leaving me to watch Khephren’s genius talents at work as I dare to imagine a future together with him and his friends.

I never let myself think it possible until now, but maybe, just maybe, it could work. All I have to do is muster up the courage to tell Khephren how I feel and ask him what he wants.

Piece of cake.

Right?



Chapter Sixteen

Privately Relayed Intergalactic Communication and Knowledge System (PRICKS)

Stardate: 47634.51

DataMaster: We had a bit of a temporary detour on our way to the Nirvana Nebulas.

EatMyCometDust: What happened? Is everything okay?

DataMaster: We stopped to help some travelers whose engine wasn't working properly.

NebulaNerd: I applaud you for helping. Space travelers really do need to rely on the kindness of others when trouble strikes.

DrWhoDaFuck: I'm assuming everything went okay?

DataMaster: Oh, yeah. But I guess the passengers were on their way to some convention based on a story called *The Tentacular Tales of Captain Starblade*. Have any of you heard of it?

EatMyCometDust: Holy space balls! How have you NOT?!?! It's been the talk of the universe for ages. The human who writes it now works for the Alliance outpost on Earth and is engaged to an Iyaran.

DrWhoDaFuck: River Sullivan is my secret crush. After Lord Vardox. That story he writes is hot like the sun! Also, there just isn't enough positive tentacle representation out there. We need more stories like it.

DataMaster: When we got back to the ship, Sasha immediately looked it up. He's been reading it for several

hours straight. Should I be worried?

EatMyCometDust: Heh. You better prepare yourself for a horny fake fiancé in need of some tentacle action.

DataMaster: *tentacle sweat-drop emoji* Uh...why is that?

NebulaNerd: Get a clue, DM. That story is pure tentacle porn!

EatMyCometDust: If I may make an addendum, it's actually very good pure tentacle porn.

KHEPHREN

Ever since we returned from helping the stranded travelers, Sasha has locked himself in his room to read *The Tentacular Tales of Captain Starblade*.

After speaking with my forum friends, I feel equal parts fear and excitement about what he thinks of this story. If it is tentacle porn, as was suggested to me, then Sasha will hopefully get a good idea of what it's like making love with someone who possesses extra, talented appendages.

Indeed, Sasha already appears to have a natural affinity for my tentacles. He enjoys being petted and caressed by them, and he's even taken one in his mouth so far. But I've been hesitant to initiate anything with them that he hasn't asked for.

It's hard for me to know how a human might feel about tentacle sex. There are other species that trade with my people who are wary or completely turned off by the prospect of becoming sexual with our kind. After all—as I was taught in my early sex-ed classes—when it comes to interspecies lovemaking, tentacles aren't for everyone.

Even though I secretly find that ludicrous. Why would someone want to limit the enhanced opportunities for sexual pleasure that multiple appendages can provide?

I was surprised when Sasha wanted to be alone after we got back from helping the Cosmic Phoenix get back up and running. He was watching me the whole time we were aboard the other vessel and I thought for sure he wanted to talk to me afterward. Instead, he scurried off leaving me alone and rather sad.

I'm not letting it get me down though. I've used the time to put one part of my plan into action for Operation Revive Sasha's Christmas Spirit!

Over the last week, he's been helping me extensively with my Automated Reality Simulation Environment project, answering all of my questions and providing details about Christmas customs and traditions that he has personally experienced. He did make it clear from the beginning that he only wanted to focus on non-religious rituals associated with Christmas, which works well for me since Dravethians do not share any of the same religions that humans have.

I have learned that, although this holiday is a deeply religious one for some, it also has interesting roots in pagan folklore. These days, in the twenty-first century of Earth, it has apparently also become a much more commercial holiday to many who focus on consuming foods and other goods associated with the season.

Based on the Hallmark movies I love, and after talking to Sasha, I decided it was just fine to cultivate my own experience based on the elements I enjoy and admire the most. Everyone has their own traditions associated with the season and I hope to create some that become ours for years to come.

While Sasha has been very informative about Christmas, he remains far from enthusiastic. He's mellowed though and is less grouchy about it all than when I first met him in that adorable elf costume.

I do so want him to wear that again someday.

Sadly, he has not yet been filled with the appropriate fervor for Yuletide fun and festivities. I aim to fix that.

Adjusting the Santa hat I had our clothing generator create, I stop in front of Sasha's door. I think my getup is quite impressive if I do say so myself.

Taking a deep breath, I knock. For several long moments, I'm met with silence. I knock again and hear a thud inside the room before approaching footsteps get louder. Sasha swings open the door, his cheeks flushed and his hair disheveled.

I ring the bells tied to each of my tentacles and break into song.

*Flying through the sky,
In a warp-drive-powered ship,
O'er the stars we go,
Marveling all the way.
Bells on tentacles ring,
Making Sasha smile,
What fun it is to kiss and hug,
In a theater for a while.*

I resume jingling my tentacle bells in earnest and clap my hands to the beat as well.

*Tentacle bells! Tentacle bells!
Tentacles all the way!*

That's as far as I make it before Sasha collapses on the floor in a fit of laughter.

It isn't quite the reaction I was going for, but this is the first time I've seen him embrace joy with abandon. I can't take my eyes off him. He clutches his sides and alternates between snorts and giggles as he rolls around on the floor. I know I probably have hearts in my eyes right now but I can't help it.

"Y-you...look...hilarious," he wheezes out between laughs.

I cross my arms and give him a mock glare. "I'll have you know I planned this look just for you. I even re-wrote a Christmas classic to go with the outfit."

Wiping at his eyes, Sasha pulls himself to his feet. "I can't believe you tied bells to your tentacles. You were giving full

on jazz hands, I mean tentacles, with those bells. It was awesome.” He snorts. “Are you trying to be a Christmas tree or Santa with this getup? If so, I wouldn’t have gone with that hat on your head. You needed a big shining star up there instead.”

My tentacles droop. “You didn’t like my performance?”

Sasha hurries forward and takes hold of my hands. “I loved it. It was the silliest, cutest thing anyone has ever done for me. Thank you.”

He leans forward and kisses me. All my worries disappear at the familiar touch of his lips against mine. I could drown in his kisses and die a happy Dravethian.

When he pulls back, I feel a pang of loss in my hearts.

“Your version of *Jingle Bells* is my new favorite.” His grin makes my tentacles perk up and their bells tinkle. Sasha chuckles at the sound.

“I thought bells were a part of Christmas? After all, there are so many songs about them.”

“Well, you’re not wrong. I just love how creatively you interpret things. It makes me look at Christmas through different eyes.”

I feel hope surge inside me. Could this mean I’ve begun to rekindle his love of Christmas?

Jonesy hops down from the bed and begins to prowl over to us to see what exactly is going on. That’s when I realize I have made an unanticipated error. Jonesy immediately fixes her golden eyes on my tentacles and the bells hanging off them.

“Watch out!” Sasha warns, but it’s too late.

The divine creature pounces on one of my tentacles, her sharp claws scratching my tender skin when she manages to yank off the bell and the string attached to it. Mission accomplished, she proceeds to ignore us and bat her victor’s bounty around the floor with supreme delight.

I pull my poor, injured tentacle close to my chest and watch in horror as blood begins to well up in three deep scratches.

Sasha winces. “Sorry about that. I should have warned you that cats are attracted to things that move and bounce like prey.” To my surprise, he takes hold of my arm and gently pulls me into the bathroom. “Here, let me help you clean the wound.” He washes my injury with soap and water, then I help him find the necessary antiseptic, ointment, and bandages in his cabinet.

With a surprisingly tender touch, he wraps the bandaging around my clean wound. My hearts throb at his kindness in this moment. I know that Sasha is not always as transparent and demonstrative as I am, but he has many small ways in which he shows his care for others if you pay attention.

“All right now?”

I push out my bottom lip. “Yes, but my plan didn’t work how I planned.”

Sasha chuckles and begins to help me untie all of the remaining bells. “What was your plan, exactly?”

“You still haven’t found your Christmas spirit. I want to help.”

Sasha sighs and gives me a soft smile. “The fact that you care so much means a lot to me, but you can’t force this type of thing. You’ve gotta let me find my love for Christmas again on my own, and I can’t guarantee it’ll ever happen.”

I shake my head stubbornly. “Christmas is about love among humankind. It isn’t about being alone.” I gather my courage to tell him something I’ve been wanting to for a while now. “I know your family abandoned you. But I hope that you will join our found family.”

Sasha stills. “Do...do you mean that?” His voice is whisper-soft but carries a weight of emotion.

I cup his face in my hands. “You fit here. With us. Although we have only known you a short time, we all feel like you are one of us, part of our band of merry misfits

forging our own path in this universe.” I have to bite my tongue not to ask him—beg him—to stay with me.

Sasha blinks away tears and clears his throat. “Thank you. I would be honored to share a chosen-family Christmas with you all.”

My tentacles dance with joy at his words. But my hearts stutter when Sasha takes my hand and kisses it as if it’s something precious to him.

Surely I’m reading too much into the action?

When he pulls me back into his bedroom, I follow him willingly. Jonesy has disappeared with the bell she stole and if I’m honest, I’m a wee bit relieved. She is fierce and powerful like the goddess she serves. She can have all my bells if she wants them!

Sasha pulls me to the bed and encourages me to sit down, then snuggles into my side. He takes my injured tentacle into his hands and gently strokes it much like he does with Jonesy.

My hearts pound so hard I fear they might burst out of my chest. This is the first time he has taken hold of one of my tentacles to comfort it. They are a part of me, and they love to be loved on. Sasha’s caresses make me wish I could produce that wonderful vibrating noise called a “purr” that Jonesy does. I suppose it must be reserved for divine beings as it is a most heavenly sound.

“I really am sorry about Jonesy,” he murmurs.

“Do not be anxious about this matter. I am quite alright,” I assure him. “My people heal quickly and the ointment that you tended my wound with will further speed up that process.”

Sasha’s shoulders sag in relief. “I’m glad to hear it. I wasn’t sure how delicate your tentacles are.”

I puff my chest out with pride. “Dravethian tentacles are strong and durable. Some species have far more delicate ones, true, but ours are hardy. Don’t forget, half our people are born with a warrior’s mark and use their tentacles in battle. They must be sturdy to weather such conflicts on a regular basis.”

Sasha's expression turns coy. "How interesting. Then I can assume they're well-equipped to handle some rigorous sexual activities as well?"

My tentacles tingle at his words and I gulp. "Ahem. That...that's correct."

Sasha lies down on the bed in a sensual pose that awakens my cock.

"I'm sorry I abandoned you for a while, but I've been doing some highly educational reading."

I swallow thickly. "You have?"

He nods and lightly runs a finger up and down my injured appendage. "I've been reading that story those travelers raved about. *The Tentacular Tales of Captain Starblade*." He licks his lips, never taking his eyes off me. "It's quite informative."

I feel my cheeks warm. "While I haven't read the story personally, I've been informed about its...nature."

Sasha arches an eyebrow. "You mean that it's tentacle porn?"

My appendages curl up in momentary mortification.

Sasha throws his head back and gives a throaty laugh. "You're adorable when you're embarrassed, but there's no reason to be. Porn is evidently universal in the universe. Heh."

I clear my throat. "That is true. The allure of sex and fantasies surrounding the activity are popular among most species."

Sasha hums thoughtfully. "There's definitely a pornastic quality to this story, including some very steamy, explicit scenes. But there's a rather compelling story behind it. It's so much more than just porn. It's got actual plot. The travelers we met were right."

I'm intrigued. "Tell me more. What is its premise?"

"Okay, so it's a really campy and soap operatic enemies-to-lovers tale. Captain Starblade is this sexy himbo of a hero and Lord Vardox is a notorious villain with tentacles." He runs

a finger down one of my uninjured appendages and I shiver. “Only, Vardox isn’t quite as bad as the rumors make out. He only uses his powers of evil against real baddies. Oh! And he’s totally got the hots for Captain Starblade and loves tying him in knots—both literally and figuratively.”

I frown. “I’m not sure I like the idea of a tentacled villain.”

“Oh, no, it’s not like that at all. Even though the story is called *The Tentacular Tales of Captain Starblade*, it’s Lord Vardox who is the stealth antihero. He’ll do anything to protect the man he loves. Seriously, he’s kind of dreamy.” Sasha sighs and I swear he has hearts in his eyes that make me a bit jealous.

I want to be the only tentacled-being he fantasizes about.

Sasha’s enthusiasm is contagious though, and I can’t help but ask, “Would you like to read me a chapter?”

Sasha’s face glows. “I love that plan!” He pulls back the covers and wriggles under them before patting the open spot next to him on the bed. “Come snuggle in here with me.” He licks his lips and waggles his eyebrows. “I’ll read you a bedtime story.”

For some reason, I have a feeling this bedtime story might lead to something far different than sleep, but I have no problems with that.

While I settle in, Sasha reaches over to his nightstand and plucks up that familiar pair of dark-framed glasses. I can’t help but grin as he slides them on. He looks so adorable like this, with his hair mussed and those glasses perched on the bridge of his nose as he prepares to read to me.

And just like that, I yearn for many more nights like this. Where I can luxuriate in bed with Sasha, and we can read to each other—as well as do plenty of other fun things.

Sasha clears his throat and looks at his laptop’s screen. I’ve offered him some of our superior tablets, but he prefers his own device. Thankfully, I was able to do some modifications so that he can access the intergalactic web.

He doesn't seem to notice that I have largely swapped out the core processor with my own materials, but I had to help bring the machine up to speed with the ship's technology. If he stays with us, I will eventually have to teach him how to use other tech, but I'm also perfectly content to continue adapting the laptop he seems to love and cherish so much. As he informed me, it was one he saved up for and paid for entirely by himself after graduating from college and it's the device he uses to edit his film projects. He takes pride in it and I completely understand. I feel precisely the same way about the Sleigh Belle and my Augmented Reality Simulation Environment.

As Sasha begins to read, I settle in, giving him my full attention as I'm sucked into the outrageous adventures of Lord Vardox and his Captain Starblade.



Chapter Seventeen

Sex in space! Yes, we're going there. As we mentioned before, traveling the universe can get lonely, and sex can be a wonderful way to combat the space travel blues. Many travelers are open to sharing physical intimacy with new friends and companions they meet along the way. Just remember to communicate your desires with your partner and make sure you're both on the same page. After all, consent is key!

—The Lonely Universe Guide to Space Travel for Beginners

SASHA

The irony isn't lost on me that I am reading tentacle porn to my tentacled alien-abductor-slash-friend-with-benefits.

My life is becoming almost as outrageous as Captain Starblade's!

By the time I get to the really naughty bits of the chapter, both Khephren and I are highly aroused and ready to ditch the story for something far more fun and orgasmic.

I yank off my glasses and hastily set them and my laptop on the floor before crawling into Khephren's lap. "Enough of that. I want the real thing." I punctuate that declaration with a playful growl.

Khephren's eyes flare with lust. He's clearly on board with this plan.

I run a finger down his chest, brushing his nipple beneath the fabric of his shirt. "So, inquiring minds want to know.

How accurate was that story when it comes to tentacles and sex?”

His cheeks flush in that adorable way they always do when Khephren gets embarrassed. “While there is quite a bit of fictional embellishment in the story, Lord Vardox’s anatomy is not dissimilar to a Dravethian’s.”

I nod, slowly licking my lips as I survey his body. “In other words, tentacles can be used for all sorts of sexy fun?”

“Two of my tentacles are designed to be enjoyed sexually. The others function more like additional limbs.”

My mind reels with possibilities. “So those ones could restrain me while the other two ravish me?” I like the sound of that!

Khephren swallows audibly. “If you so wished.”

It’s definitely a scenario I intend to try at some point, but for tonight I want something else. “What if I told you I wanted you to fuck me tonight?”

Khephren goes as still as a frozen computer screen—apart from his tentacles, that is, which quiver with obvious excitement.

I smirk at seeing my effect on him.

Giving a mock sigh at his silence, I pout. “I’m hoping I won’t have to negotiate with you like Lord Vardo—”

Before I can finish my sentence, Khephren springs into action and flips me onto my back, then settles over me with a possessive growl that thrills me to my core. Those kaleidoscope eyes of his swirl above me like cosmic clouds of passion.

“Tell me more,” he rasps. “Tell me everything you want.”

My throat goes dry. I want so *much*. So many things I can’t have, but for now I know without a doubt that I can have this—and I don’t intend to wait around any longer. I want Khephren to fuck me as long and as often as possible in the short time we have left together.

If anyone had asked me several weeks ago if I could ever envision myself having sex with an alien who had tentacles, I probably would have called them a psycho and given them the finger as I walked away. But now, I can't think of anyone I want more than Khephren—pink tentacles and all.

So I tell him exactly what I want. I've never been shy in the bedroom. I know what I like and I go for it. Sex is far easier than emotions in that respect.

“I want your tentacle to prep me and then I want you to fuck me with your pleasure nodule-covered cock until we both come so hard we lose all conscious thought.”

Khephren shudders, his tentacles convulsing at my words. I'm learning that tentacles, especially Khephren's, can be *so* expressive. I love that about him.

He opens his eyes and stares deep into mine. “I would love to do that with you.” He cups my face with his hand and caresses my cheek, his touch soft and tender. “Are you sure this is what you want?”

“Yes,” I tell him unequivocally.

He grins that charmingly boyish grin of his. “Your wish is my command, sweet Sasha.”

I let out a surprised squeak when he slides off me and several of his tentacles pick me up with the greatest of ease so he can carry me toward the bathroom.

“What are you doing?”

His heavy-lidded gaze meets mine. “Things can get a little messy with tentacles. I think our first time would be best suited in the shower.”

I think I'm starting to understand why their showers are so big.

One of Khephren's tentacles presses the button that gets the shower going while the others skillfully remove all of my clothing in the blink of an eye, and I'm left there, naked and slightly stupefied, as he tears off his own garments.

I look my fill when he stands nude before me, his dark pink erection pointed proudly toward his belly. We've rubbed each other off and frothed many times in the past few days, and I've sucked on his self-lubricating tentacle, but I've been yearning to feel that cock and its pleasure nodules inside my ass for what feels like a painfully long eternity.

Tonight, I'm ready to level up our sexual game. Thank you very much, Lord Vardox and Captain Starblade!

I'm grateful those stranded travelers introduced me to that serial. Reading it has definitely made me feel up for tentacle fucking. I sincerely hope the real deal is as fucking good or better than Lord Vardox makes it seem.

Steam begins to rise from the shower and Khephren pulls me inside. We stand under the stream with our slick, naked bodies pressed against one another.

I revel in the sensation. Sure, I've been naked with plenty of guys before, but there's something magical that happens when my skin comes into contact with Khephren's. It's as if something lights up inside me, energizing me like nothing else. He feels so right to me—like he should be mine and I his.

But those are dumb fantasies. Our time together is fast coming to an end and I don't believe in Christmas miracles. Not anymore.

I shove those depressing thoughts away and turn my attention back to the moment. Fuck you, morose brain, I'm damn well going to enjoy this and memorize every second of my first time getting fucked by Khephren. This is going to be so fucking good it blows my mind, probably the best I've ever had, I'm sure of it. After all, Khephren is a total overachiever. He's going to go all out in fucking me so well that I'll be ruined for any other man—or alien—forever.

It's a small price I'm willing to pay.

"Let me wash you," Khephren says, grabbing a biodegradable loofah with one of his tentacles while another pumps the eco-friendly body wash onto it.

I nod my agreement and he begins to scrub down my entire body with infinite tenderness, being incredibly thorough in his almost ritualistic ablutions. And when I say he cleans me everywhere, I mean he cleans me *everywhere*.

Sadly, I've never had a partner take this kind of care with me before penetrative sex, but I should've known Khephren would be different. From the moment we met, he's been one of a kind. He bravely goes his own way, not worrying about what others think. I wish I could be that brave.

While he cleans my body, I can't take my eyes off him. Something monumental grows inside my chest, something so large that it feels like it can't be contained and may stop my breath at any moment. This man, my very own Tentacle Boy, is heartbreakingly precious to me.

I'm forced to accept the truth that I've known for some time now.

I'm in love with Khephren Thrase.

And I don't know what to fucking do about it.

Najar's words from earlier still echo in my mind, and deep down inside, an ember of hope kindles.

Maybe he's right. Maybe Khephren would want me to stay.

Almost immediately, that cynical voice in my head sows the seeds of uncertainty. But what would that even mean? And for how long? How long until he realizes I'm not worth it?

I close my eyes and bat the thought away. Khephren isn't like that. He'd never deliberately hurt me in such a cruel, callous fashion. But when he grows tired of me, because everyone does, he'll still send me on my way—just far more kindly than anyone else. He'll return me home and disappear, taking my heart with him and leaving me empty and alone.

I don't know if I could bear it.

Such fears are too painful to contemplate. If I were to take a massive leap of faith and trust Khephren, knowing I would be wholly dependent on him at least to start, I wouldn't have any guarantees of outcomes. I *know* there are no guarantees in

life, but my tattered heart is terrified Khephren will break it, and if he does, I don't think it would ever recover.

I shake my head to dislodge these persistent thoughts. They aren't doing anything for my boner, that's for sure.

When I'm thoroughly squeaky clean, I take the loofah from Khephren and return the favor, washing him and his tentacles with sensual thoroughness while being careful to shield his one limb wounded from Jonesy's earlier attack.

I smile just thinking about what caused it. When he appeared at my door with that silly Santa hat on his head and those bells tied around each of his eight tentacles, I didn't have a clue what was going on. But when he started singing his adorkable rendition of "Jingle Bells"? I experienced the type of pure, unadulterated happiness that I haven't known since I was a young child, back when I still believed in my parents' love and had no worries about the future. A time before my world was shattered by the harshness of reality.

Khephren has been so sweetly dogged in his efforts to try to rekindle my Christmas spirit, and I'm amazed to find that I'm relenting by inches every day.

Before I was abducted, I'd been dreading the holidays. But now I'm looking forward to spending Christmas with Khephren, Luna, and Najar. When my Tentacle Boy invited me to become part of their found family for Christmas, I knew he would always and forever hold a piece of my heart—a piece he had healed with his acceptance, his kindness, and his caring. Because I can trust he meant every word, I know I can be vulnerable tonight and it'll all be okay. He won't hurt me like others have before.

While Rick and Ilsa will always have Paris in *Casablanca*, Khephren and I will always have an intergalactic Christmas among the stars.

I lean up on my tiptoes and wrap my arms around Khephren's neck to pull him down for a kiss. Under the hot spray of the shower, we make love to one another's mouths, our hands roaming over each other's bodies.

Eventually, Khephren breaks away with a feral growl. In a superhuman move, three of his tentacles whip around him to lift and hold me with my back against the shower wall. One wraps securely around my middle to keep me steady and the other two wrap around my legs, just under my hips, spreading my thighs wide and exposing me to his hot gaze.

Holy fuck, that's hot.

Moving between my legs, his chest heaving and his nostrils flaring, Khephren kneels down on the shower floor while his tentacles hold me aloft. He studies my vulnerable hole long enough to make me simultaneously aroused and embarrassed.

“Oh, Sasha,” he whispers at long last, his voice rough. “You are so beautiful.”

My poor heart beats painfully and I have to fight back tears as I look down at him between my legs, water dripping from his long, wet, magenta hair.

“You're beautiful too, Tentacle Boy,” I murmur. “Now show me what you and those tentacles can do.”

He doesn't need any further encouragement. I cry out as Khephren dives in face-first and starts to eat my ass like he's a starving man and I'm his first meal in weeks. He savors me with gusto, licking and probing and tasting every inch of me. Fucking hell, he's not shy about this. I've never had anyone worship my ass like this in my life. Man, have I been missing out!

It doesn't take long before I'm moaning and begging like a needy porn star.

Just when I don't think I can take it anymore, Khephren pulls his mouth back and his lubricated tentacle moves between my thighs, a move that makes the tip of my painfully hard dick leak precome.

He pauses, searching my eyes again. “Is this what you want?”

“Fuck, yeah. Get that slippery sucker inside me now, Tentacle Boy.”

Khephren grins in response to the note of demand in my voice. The slick tip of his appendage begins to flick and circle my already wet opening. By now, the nerve endings there are hyperstimulated and tender. Just when I'm about to grab his tentacle and finish this myself, the tip slips inside my entrance and begins to push further into me.

I can't even begin to describe the sensation. It both is and isn't like a cock. His tentacle has the ability to move inside me in ways that no man's dick ever has. It squirms and wriggles as it searches for my prostate, and I nearly hit the ceiling when it finally does.

The Tentacular Tales of Captain Starblade did not lie!

Having found its target, Khephren's tentacle rubs and presses against my gland with unrelenting focus and far too quickly I'm really fucking close to shooting my load without even having touched my damn dick. But I don't want things to end so soon. I *need* to feel Khephren's cock inside me still. I want to come with him hammering into me and those pleasure nodules rubbing against my insides.

I hastily reach down and grab the base of my cock, squeezing hard to stave off my impending orgasm.

"Enough!" I cry out. Khephren stops, becoming unnaturally still. He peers up at me, water glistening on his skin.

"Are you all right?"

I glare at him and huff. "I'm about to come all over myself here. Get your tentacle out of my ass and get that dick of yours in me right now."

Khephren's mouth drops open and then he throws his head back and laughs before focusing his gaze on me again, an alluring smile curving his lips. "You are one of a kind, Sasha Vasiliev, and I lo—"

He cuts himself off and my heart stutters.

He swallows thickly. "Are you sure this is what you want?"

I pinch him lightly on one of his tentacles and he startles. “Listen up, Tentacle Boy. I’m good with all the consent and checking in about what I want, but I’ve told you flat out that I want your dick in my ass. *Now*. I don’t think there’s anything to be confused about. Make it happen or I’m going to jack myself off so I can stop being sexually frustrated.”

Khephren growls and bats my hand away from my cock before he stands.

I’m still held up against the shower wall, and the tentacles around my legs keep my thighs spread open as he guides his cock to my entrance and I eagerly wrap my calves around Khephren’s hips. His eyes focus on mine to check for signs of pain or discomfort as he slowly begins to press inside. But his lengthy prep work has paid off.

We fit together so perfectly. The sensation of him filling me up takes my breath away.

Khephren doesn’t rush. He’s big but I’ve always enjoyed partners who are packing more than the average Joe in their pants.

When I feel Khephren’s balls come to rest against my ass, I have him wait for a moment as my passage involuntarily clenches around the intrusion. I close my eyes and take several deep breaths, willing myself to relax.

“You can move now,” I tell him when I finally do. And he does.

His first shallow thrust lights me up like the Christmas tree at Rockefeller fucking Center.

“Holy fucking pleasure nodules!” I cry out.

He wasn’t lying when he said those things vibrate.

Khephren rocks into me again.

“Ahhhh!”

If I thought his tentacle was amazing inside me, his cock is next level.

“Ohgodohgodohgod,” I chant.

Khephren begins to pull out farther and then drive back into me, and soon we're moving together in an age-old rhythm.

I lose awareness of everything around me and my focus shrinks down to Khephren, all of my senses attuned to him as he takes me apart with the greatest of ease.

Dammit! I think I'd been delaying bottoming for him because I knew if he fucked me, I'd be fucked in more ways than one, and I was right. I don't know how I'm going to leave him when this is all over. This sweet, pink alien—my very own Tentacle Boy—has officially ruined me for any other man or alien.

My mind gets hazy as my orgasm looms. I feel that telltale tingle at the base of my spine and heat rushing toward my balls.

"I'm gonna come," I warn him.

"Yes," he growls, and his hips piston even faster. His fucking turns wild, almost out of control, as he nears his own release, and it's so good I can't hold back. The pleasure nodules vibrate inside me as his cock nails my prostate one final time, and that's all it takes to tip me over the edge.

I spurt come between us and my passage clamps down tight on Khephren's cock. That only makes the vibrating pleasure nodules feel that much more intense, and I cry out as my dick gives a second desperate spurt before I collapse boneless against Khephren's smooth, hairless chest. My balls feel like they've been drained so dry they've withered down to the size of walnuts.

Khephren is quick to follow, especially when I deliberately tighten my channel around him again. He throws his head back and roars with satisfaction as he empties his release inside me.

I've never gone bare before. However, given the minimal risk involved in doing this with Khephren, I didn't fight my need to feel every part of him inside me. The heat of his release is a new sensation though. I moan as I feel it start to

trickle out of my hole and down my legs. Messy is right. Khephren's shower idea was inspired!

He continues to shallowly thrust inside me, and his orgasm lasts for about three times as long as any human I've known. Finally, his cock softens and slowly he begins to pull out of me. I hiss at the slight sting. His tentacles release me to the ground and I stand on shaky feet as he rinses us both clean before turning off the shower. Before I can even offer a weak protest, because I don't really want to anyway, he picks me up and bundles me in a towel, drying me off almost reverently, like I'm precious to him.

I haven't been precious to anyone in years.

I shied away from relationships in the past, especially after everything that happened with my parents. It was hard for me to trust anyone with my heart when I knew how easily they could rip it to shreds. Instead, I used casual hookups to fulfill my sexual needs and bricked off the part of me that wanted to just be loved, keeping it safe behind an impenetrable wall.

But in the short time I've been here, Khephren's been meticulously tearing down that wall brick by brick and opening me up to feel again. It's almost more than I can take and yet also somehow not enough.

After wrapping us both in cozy robes from the bathroom cupboard, Khephren carries me back into my bedroom and I let him. He stops next to my bed and his tentacles begin doing their excited Kermit flail.

I fucking love him so goddamn much.

"Perfect timing," he says, staring out the panoramic window.

I follow his gaze and gasp.

Before us is the most incredible vista I've ever witnessed. Luminescent swirls of cosmic dust look like they've been brushed across the sky in a rainbow of mind-blowing colors that extend as far as the eye can see.

Khephren snuggles me close in his arms and rests his chin on top of my head. "This is one of my early presents to you.

Instead of giving you the Twelve Days of Christmas, I give you the Twelve Nirvana Nebulas.”

I look up at him, my heart stuttering. “What?”

One of his tentacles strokes my back. “I wanted to show you to experience this with me. The Nirvana Nebulas are considered some of the most captivating natural phenomena in the universe.” He stares out the window with wonder written all over his expressive face. “Stunning, aren’t they?”

My heart starts beating so fast I worry I might pass out. “You brought us here so I could see this...with you?”

He flushes and gives me that delighted grin that melts my insides every damn time. “Do you like it?”

“I love it.”

I love you, my brain whispers.

Khephren kisses my forehead and we both turn our eyes back to the spectacular sight. We stay there for a long time, soaking in the experience, and I memorize every moment, locking them deep inside so I can bring them out for comfort when Khephren is gone from my life for good and I’m alone again.



Chapter Eighteen

Privately Relayed Intergalactic Communication and Knowledge System (PRICKS)

Stardate: 47634.52

DataMaster: I need a pep talk. I'm super nervous about giving Sasha my final Christmas gift and asking him to stay.

EatMyCometDust: You got this, man!

DrWhoDaFuck: It's all about the grand gesture! At least according to the rom-com movies.

DataMaster: I'm starting to worry my final plan won't top the Nirvana Nebulas. Now I'm second-guessing my grand gesture.
sweat-drop tentacle emoji

NebulaNerd: Are you sure you want to do this? You've only known your Earthling for a few weeks and you're contemplating a life-altering decision for you both. Don't rush in if you aren't ready.

DataMaster: I've never felt more ready in my life. I love him and I want to be with him.

EatMyCometDust: *teary-eyed emoji* It's been so beautiful watching this love story between you two sweet kids unfold.

DrWhoDaFuck: Don't second-guess yourself. If you know you're pulling out all the stops for him, then you've done all you can. Now it's up to him.

DataMaster: I suppose I have to have faith and believe in Christmas miracles!

KHEPHREN

The next week flies by faster than light speed and I work very hard not to think about how little time I have left with Sasha. After spending several amazing days cruising around the Nirvana Nebulas and making love multiple times a day, I finally put us back on a course to return to Earth.

Although I admit we are taking the longer scenic route back, not only because it's more beautiful but because I want to cling to every extra second I have with Sasha.

We weren't just having sex for the last week though. Sasha finished his script soon after we reached the nebulas and started us all on learning and rehearsing our roles. It was a whirlwind of preparation in the short span of a few days, but he soon had us filming scenes.

While I do consider myself something of a natural talent in front of the camera, the real stars turned out to be Jonesy, our central lead, and, surprisingly enough, Najar. Luna supplied the voice of Jonesy, which Sasha explained he would edit so it seems like she's talking to us in the film. It's a perfect fit for Luna, and she's wonderfully sassy and snarky as Princess Jonesy of Planet Caturm.

In a brilliant and creative move on Sasha's part, Najar plays her straight-man comedic sidekick, offering droll commentary and pithy one-liners at the perfect moment.

The script is vastly entertaining, and we all had quite a bit more fun working on the project than we expected. None of us could determine what the final product would be like while we were filming, but I'm quite proud of how convincing the settings I created in my Augmented Reality Simulation Environment were. Even Sasha was downright giddy during the filming process, marveling over what I'd created and telling me that they're better than any studio backdrop, soundstage, or green screen environment he's ever worked in.

I don't know what all of that means, but I soak up his praise eagerly whenever he gives it.

But perhaps what was most enjoyable about the experience as a whole was watching Sasha in his element. I truly began to see his passion for filmmaking and his love of storytelling

through the medium. If I can help him make his dreams more of a reality, then I will do anything and everything in my power to do so.

On set, as Sasha described it, he was focused and intense, but also patient and encouraging, praising us all when we performed well and offering constructive suggestions for things we could improve or do differently in another “take.”

I find my cinematic vocabulary has been growing by leaps and bounds. After each round of filming, Sasha would hurry off to begin reviewing what he calls “dailies.” He also explained how he started editing some of the “raw footage” to see how things were progressing according to his vision. While he’s been busy editing, I’ve used the time to focus on my work while he’s intent on his.

It’s clear to me that Sasha and I would make perfect partners for so many reasons. We each have our own interests and pursuits, but we still make time for one another and share many similar interests. Every night we’ve been going to my private theater to watch classic human movies together before we head to bed to read more Tentacular Tales and try out some of the sexy moves Lord Vardox and Captain Starblade use on each other.

When Christmas Eve morning rolls around, I finally manage to put the finishing touches on my grand surprise for all my friends, but mostly for Sasha. I sigh with relief. I made it just in the nick of time.

The com on the wall beside me crackles to life and Luna’s voice echoes throughout the room. “Get your ass to the kitchen, Kheph! You need to help us get this party ready.”

“On my way,” I tell her cheerfully and shut everything down before heading to find her.

We’ve been covertly working on preparing a Christmas Eve celebration. The dining area of the ship is decked out in our Christmas best from the intergalactic market. I’ve moved it all to this room, including the luminescent air-purifying moss that’s now strung up like tinsel, and Luna’s colorful string of lights made from old, recycled bulbs of varying

colors. I've even brought Howie the Chumarg tree in, which we've decorated with a number of ornaments created by the generator. Thankfully, he's sleeping now so his eyes are closed. They tend to freak out Sasha.

I know it's not exactly like what Sasha would find on Earth, but it's very much our own Sleigh Belle brand of holiday spirit! I think he'll like it.

We've also dressed up for the occasion, since we each created a Christmas sweater from the generator. Mine is white with a big green Christmas tree on the front. Luna's is green with the image of two large yellow bells wrapped with red ribbon across her chest. Najar's is red with an enormous candy cane painted in the center. We also each have our matching Santa hats.

I think we look quite fetching and oh so festive!

While I've been hard at work in the Augmented Reality Simulation Environment, Khephren and Luna have begun putting together a delectable Christmas feast. I quickly join them to help in preparing several comfort food dishes from our home world that I want to introduce to Sasha. He encouraged us to make Christmas our own and told me that every family has their own recipes and dishes they tend to serve during the holiday. I just hope he enjoys some of the ones we've chosen to make.

I do find myself a bit perplexed, however, in trying to recreate a drink called eggnog for Sasha. It's featured in many a movie I've watched, and I confess I've long wanted to try it. I've done extensive research about it on the intergalactic web, but our food generator does not have ingredients that easily replicate what this unusual drink concoction seems to contain.

I experiment with a creamy milk that comes from an indigenous fruit on our world and blend in a mix of aromatics and sweetener before topping it off with a hearty dose of Draveth's popular Aged Spice Liquor that I've been saving for a special occasion.

I sample my own glass and smack my lips with satisfaction. Neptune's nads! I might just be a genius when it

comes to making Christmas beverages!

Luna and Najar both taste test my concoction as well and give me full tentacles-up. Now I can't wait for Sasha to try it!

Around lunchtime, we have everything ready. With all three hearts beating fast, I turn on the Christmas tunes and use the com to message directly to Sasha's room.

"Sasha, it's lunchtime. If you could come and join me in the dining area, I'd love for us all to have lunch together on this Christmas Eve."

He responds quickly. "Perfect timing, Tentacle Boy. I just finished editing the first cut of our debut episode of *The Cat-Tacular Tales of Princess Jonesy*. I can't wait to screen it for you all!"

I chuckle. He was inspired by *The Tentacular Tales of Captain Starblade* when he created that title, as he freely admits. As he explained to me, why not ride on the coattails of someone else's success? Perhaps he too could become an instant hit across the universe.

"Wonderful," I tell him. "See you soon."

My hearts are racing as Najar, Luna, Rambo, and I wait to reveal our secret party.

When Sasha rounds the corner a few moments later, we all shout, "Surprise!" and "Merry Christmas!"

Sasha freezes mid-stride and gapes at us. "Oh my freaking god! You guys look amazing." A huge smile breaks out over his face.

I sweep my arms and tentacles out in welcome, and he joins us, studying our decorations and the table laid with a smorgasbord of food.

"You guys did all of this for me?"

I beam at him. "We did it for all of us, but we wanted to surprise you in particular. This is our very first Christmas together. We consider you a part of our chosen family and want to celebrate with you. We hope you feel the same."

Luna and Najar nod in agreement.

Rambo beeps out a little tune. “One of us! One of us!”

Sasha’s eyes glisten with unexpected tears and he sniffs. “Damn you, Khephren Thrase, for giving me all kinds of feels.” But he tempers those words with a smile. “I’m very happy to be part of this amazing family. Now let’s get this celebration started!”

Luna cheers and we all take a seat at the table and begin digging into the food. Sasha does not seem bothered by the fact that we don’t have any traditional human dishes. In all honesty, he’s adapted surprisingly well to life on our ship. He tries everything on the table, seeming to enjoy it all except the raw Grelok meatfish. I don’t blame him. It’s a bit of an acquired taste but one that Najar loves. He slurps down the raw delicacy with relish.

With a great deal of ceremony, I serve Sasha a glass of what I’m calling Khephren’s Christmas Nog.

He studies the drink with interest as I explain. “I wanted to make a beverage for the holidays that would be similar to one from your planet. I am most intrigued by eggnog in the films I’ve seen. However, we do not have the necessary ingredients on my planet, and the generator can only work with organic food items it has archived in its database. This is my own rendition, and I hope you enjoy it.”

Sasha lifts his glass and encourages me to do the same. He then clinks his with the edge of mine and says, “Cheers.”

I tilt my head in inquiry.

He chuckles. “It’s something we do on Earth as a way to recognize one another when we share a drink together.”

I like this idea and quickly clink my glass against his for a second time. Then an idea comes to me and I fight back a grin as I say, “Here’s looking at you, kid!”

He grins. “You old-fashioned romantic, you.”

When it comes to Sasha, always and forever.

We both take a sip of my nog, and I savor the delicious concoction with satisfaction.

Sasha, however, immediately begins coughing.

I frown. “Are you all right?”

He pounds a hand on his chest. “I’m good, just breathing fire. What kind of alcohol did you put in this? It’s seriously strong.”

I consider it. “It’s a well-known spirit from our home world called Aged Spice Liquor.”

He sips his drink a bit more delicately and licks his lips. “It does taste good. Very creamy. The spices are different from those on Earth but enjoyable.” He shakes his head. “But I better go easy on this because I have a feeling the alcohol you used is a pretty high proof.”

I’m abashed to realize I failed to calculate whether Earthlings could handle Dravethian liquor.

Sasha considers me over the rim of his glass. “Is your species by chance able to metabolize alcohol more easily than others in general, or just mine in particular?”

Luna, Najar, and I look at each other.

“Ah, yes,” Najar confirms. “We have three hearts, and our liver is larger than that of the average human, so we process things like alcohol much faster.”

My concern mounts and my tentacles want to snatch the drink out of Sasha’s hand to keep him safe, but I restrain them.

“Yeah, you’re right to drink that slowly, Sasha,” Luna chimes in. “The last thing we want is for you to develop alcohol poisoning.”

I gasp and feel my cheeks pale. Screw holding back! I immediately reach out to take the beverage away from Sasha but he moves it out of my grasp and waggles a finger at me. “Hey now. You made this special for me. Don’t worry, I’ve done this before. I’ll sip it slowly and drink plenty of water. Besides with all this food, I’m sure it’s going to absorb a lot of the alcohol in my stomach anyway.”

Despite his assurances, I resolve to keep a close eye on him.

We spend several hours at the table eating and talking, reveling in the merriment of the holiday together. Even Najar seems more relaxed and approachable than he usually does. I think we all needed this time together. And quite possibly the nog.

However, in the back of my mind, I can't help but think about the clock ticking on our time with Sasha. Even now, our ship is slowly making its way back toward his solar system and the planet Earth.

As the Christmas music transitions to a slower song, I stand and hold out my hand to Sasha. "Would you do me the honor of this dance?"

He blinks at my hand a couple of times, his pupils dilated, and I realize he's experiencing some of the effects of the drink.

He gives me a goofy grin. "You want to dance with me like we did on our first real date?"

"More than anything."

In the background, Rambo beeps and whistles loudly.

Sasha gets to his feet, and I take him into my arms, moving away from the table as we glide into the dance.

It's nothing complicated. We hold on to one another, my arms around his waist and his around my neck, while we gaze into each other's eyes as we sway to the music. Time becomes amorphous as I bask in this closeness with Sasha.

Our party turns out to be a memorable experience for us all. Sasha and I alternate between slow dancing and playing tabletop games with Luna and Najar. My friends share stories of our times together as children, and Sasha is full of laughter and bright-eyed through it all. I spend most of my time watching him and etching every detail in my mind.

When our typical dinnertime rolls around, we're all stuffed to the brim and satisfied. The food we prepared has been demolished and only scraps are left on the serving plates. We

discover that Jonesy enjoys the raw meatfish Najar favors, and we catch him sneaking her little pieces as we clean up.

Still tipsy from the Christmas nog I created, Sasha struggles to his feet, swaying a little, but one of my tentacles whips out and wraps around his waist to hold him steady. He flutters his eyelashes at me and makes a kissy face.

Luna cackles and I blush.

Sasha seems oblivious, however, and loudly calls for everyone's attention. "I want to thank you all for this awesome party. And for this amazing time that I've spent with all of you. The last few weeks have been unreal. I wasn't thrilled at first when I was abducted, which is totally natural by the way, but it has proven to be one of the happiest, funnest times of my life. A truly unforgettable experience that no other human is likely to have. I'm thrilled that fate, or random chance, led you to find me."

My tentacles flail with the need to hold him tight in my arms.

"I want to share my Christmas present with all of you." Sasha flushes. "I don't have any money to buy goods or anything like that. But as I mentioned earlier, I did complete the first cut of the first episode of *The Cat-Tacular Tales of Princess Jonesy*, and I'd love to show it to you all in Khephren's private theater if he's okay with that."

I nod enthusiastically.

Sasha raises his now empty glass. "To the theater!"

Unable to hold back any longer, I go and scoop him up in my arms, and set his glass down—no refills on the nog! While I carry him to the theater, he stares up at me with a bemused look on his face.

"Why are you carrying me?"

Because I want to hold you and never let you go.

I clear my throat. "I think you're feeling the effects of my special Christmas nog, and I must keep you safe. We don't want you falling down and hurting yourself."

Sasha yawns and stretches in my arms before nuzzling into my chest with a contented sigh. “You can carry me wherever you want to go, Tentacle Boy.” There’s a faint slur to his voice.

My hearts start thumping wildly at his words. I have to remind myself he’s mildly inebriated and doesn’t know what he’s saying. He might not mean what I so desperately want to hear.

When we get to my theater, I unlock the room and lead everyone inside. While Luna and Najar take their seats, I fire up the system to play Sasha’s movie. I taught him how to store his work on our ship’s cloud server, so it takes no time at all for me to pull it up. I program the lights to turn down and we all settle in and sit back to watch the end result of Sasha’s creative vision and our combined hard work.

Despite the many hours it took us to film, this first episode is only fifteen minutes long. Sasha informed us when he started that he’s interested in working with shorter serial formats, particularly on a “low-budget production” like ours. He’s teaching me so many words and I’m delighted to learn more about the art form that is his passion!

The episode is fifteen minutes of perfection in my opinion. It’s a fun, adventurous romp with plenty of humor. Najar and Jonesy really take center stage, and Luna’s voicing of Jonesy’s character is uncanny to watch. It truly looks like the cat is speaking with Luna’s voice! We all marvel at Sasha’s talents as a filmmaker.

When it comes to an end, we give a raucous round of applause and Sasha blushes prettily in response.

Later, as I cuddle Sasha’s sleeping form in my arms, I stare out the window knowing the Sleigh Belle is bringing us closer with every minute of every hour to his home on Earth. My tentacles clench around him, not wanting to let go.

Tomorrow morning, I will make my final stand. I’ll pull out all the stops in my final Christmas gift to Sasha and hope beyond hope that he feels the same way I do, that he wants to stay with me and the rest of our found family while we

continue to explore the many wonders of this vast and beautiful universe.

If there really is a Santa out there, I hope with all my might that he'll make my Christmas wish come true because all I want for Christmas forevermore is Sasha.



Chapter Nineteen

Instagram Post: @ScreamQueenKitty Takes Her Final Bow

@screamqueenkitty: I'm sad to announce that I'm closing down this account for the foreseeable future. We've had a good run, but I have some new and exciting opportunities I want to take advantage of while I can. Thanks for all your encouragement and support. Jonesy and I love you guys!

Reply @slasherslayersupreme: *crying emoji* Say it ain't so! We're gonna miss you!

Reply @screamqueenkitty: Thanks! We may be back one day. Consider this a long-term hiatus.

@gorehound89: Life is about change. Glad to hear there are good things on your horizon. Chase that, man.

Reply @screamqueenkitty: Much appreciated!

@horrorfilmfanatic666: Jonesy will always be our favorite Final Girl! Good luck to you both.

Reply @screamqueenkitty: Don't worry. She and I will be working on some other media projects I hope to be able to share soon!

SASHA

“**W**ake up! Wake up!” A far-too-conscious and excited voice shouts, dragging me from my sleep.

I open one eye to see Khephren wearing what appears to be a replicated version of my old elf costume. That goofball clearly snuck it to the generator to make a matching outfit.

“It’s Christmas morning!” he cries with all the unrestrained excitement of a five-year-old child.

I groan and pull a pillow over my head. “Five more minutes.”

He pulls the cozy blankets off me like a magician yanking a tablecloth off a table. “No more sleeping! It’s Christmas! We need to make the most of it and celebrate every minute.”

I groan. My head throbs with a dull ache and my throat’s dry.

Fucking hell. I literally had one glass of that Christmas nog Khephren made, and it laid me on my ass. I don’t even want to know what kind of proof that stuff was, but it’s definitely not something I can drink with any regularity.

That thought brings with it a cloud of gloom.

It’s not like I’m going to have any chance to drink it on a regular basis anyway. Today is Christmas and Khephren is going to return me home within another day or two. My time aboard the Sleigh Belle is almost at an end.

“Come on, sleepyhead,” Khephren singsongs. “Get up, get up.”

I heave a very loud and put-upon sigh before I remove the pillow from my head and glare at him. “I blame you and your Christmas nog for the pain I’m in now.”

His excitement falters and is replaced with concern. “Are you ill?”

“It’s called a hangover.”

He thinks about this for a moment. “Ah yes, my neural linguistic translator recognizes that term. The effects of too much alcohol in the bodily system.”

He walks over to the generator on the wall and types in something. Within moments, a steaming mug of kavga is revealed.

Like an angel from upon high, Khephren brings my salvation over to me and I sit up, eagerly taking the hot cup

between both hands and inhaling the fragrant brew before chugging down a hearty gulp. This stuff is like espresso to the power of ten. It's rich, dark, intense—and it wakes me up with the force of an electric cattle prod in about point two seconds.

“I've added some electrolytes to the drink to help with the dehydration,” he says.

Seriously, how has this cinnamon roll of an extraterrestrial remained single? He's the sweetest, most thoughtful guy I've ever known.

Leaving him is going to hurt like a sonofabitch.

You don't have to leave. Tell him you want to stay, a little voice says in my head.

I run a hand through my hair and flash him a quick smile. “Thank you.” My mind is a roiling mess, so I focus on gulping down the rest of the steaming *kavga*, not caring that it burns my throat in the process. When I finish it, I'm feeling mostly human again, and I stumble my way toward the bathroom where I close the door in Khephren's face. I love him but I need some time to collect myself to face this day—and some tough decisions I have to make.

“Give me ten minutes to grab a shower and I'll go wherever you want.”

I take care of my bodily needs first and then hop into the shower, letting the steaming water cleanse away the last remnants of sleep fog permeating my brain.

Do I tell Khephren how I feel today? Am I ready to leave behind my life on Earth for a life in space?

I honestly don't know what to do. All of Khephren's actions show his affection and care for me. But is it love? Is it strong enough that he'll want me to stay with him permanently?

Najar seemed to think so but warned me that Khephren probably won't speak up first. He's too worried that he could unduly pressure me. While I find his concern honorable, it's also really fucking frustrating.

I don't know if I can put my heart out there, unsure if it will be protected and cared for or stomped on and destroyed for good. It would be safer to part as friends and hold on to the wonderful memories we made together. But deep down, where Khephren has slowly pulled away those heart-protecting bricks, I feel like we could be so much more if I could just find the courage to go after it.

I'm still undecided after I dry off and put on a pair of leggings and a dark green tunic. That's about as Christmassy as I'm about to get for Khephren, but I have made an effort.

When I step out of the bathroom, he beams at me, his tentacles shimmying around him with barely restrained eagerness. "Come with me. There's something I want to show you."

I don't really know what to expect and am surprised when we make our way toward his pet project—his ARSE, aka the Augmented Reality Simulation Environment. Talk about a mouthful. If I stay with him, I need to convince him to change the name if we're going to try to sell it.

Luna and Najar are waiting outside with equally curious expressions.

"Took you long enough," Luna complains, hands on her hips and her tentacles unable to stay still. She's dressed in an elf outfit that matches Khephren's.

I should have known.

I narrow my eyes at her. "Hey, you all got me drunk on Christmas nog last night and I have a hangover this morning. I needed a shower before I could face the day."

Luna bites her lips, expression instantly contrite. "Sorry, Sasha. We didn't know that humans were so weak when it comes to alcohol."

I roll my eyes. "We're not weak. We just don't have gigantic livers and three hearts that can metabolize alcohol the way you guys can."

"Touché," Najar replies, his golden tentacles still and calm. He seems to be the only one whose tentacles give nothing

away about his feelings. Not surprisingly, *he's* not wearing a ridiculous elf costume. Thank god.

Khephren clears his throat. "Merry Christmas, everyone. This is something special I've been working on for a while, my Christmas gift to you all. I hope you enjoy."

Once Khephren initiates the sequence from his terminal, the room around us disappears and transforms into a stunning winter wonderland that makes us all gasp.

Two large horse-driven sleighs stand before us with smiling drivers ready to take us on a ride. Khephren points Luna and Najar to the first carriage. They get in and cover themselves with the blankets provided and hold up a thermos they find.

"What's this?" Luna asks.

"Hot cocoa," Khephren announces with pride. He grins at me. "Chocolate is something that other species have brought back from Earth over the years, and I was fortunate to get a sample as a thank-you gift from the travelers we rescued on their way to the Tentacular Tales Con."

I lick my lips. "Please tell me there's some for us as well."

He grins happily. "Of course."

Najar and Luna wave at us as they head off in their sleigh for the experience Khephren explained he has curated for them. He and I are apparently going on our own adventure together.

Khephren takes my hand and helps me up into our sleigh before he joins me. We snuggle together on the bench, drawing the warm blanket around us. I'm not sure how he's making it happen, but the environment around us is frosty and cold, enough that I see my breath fogging in the air. I'm grateful to find that in this simulation we're decked out in warm winter outerwear. While I'm no stranger to cold, having grown up in Chicago, it's been a while since I've seen snow. We don't get much of it out in Los Angeles.

All around us the "Sleigh Ride" song as sung by Ella Fitzgerald starts playing, and the sleigh moves forward,

carrying us through the crisp snow that sparkles in the afternoon sunlight.

Khephren pours us both steaming mugs of hot chocolate and we sip them together as we go through the scenic countryside surrounded by snow-covered trees and softly rolling hills that soon give way to something fantastical.

“This is the candy cane forest,” Khephren explains.

I marvel as the sleigh takes us through a veritable forest of enormous candy canes. It’s like something out of a children’s movie but with a whole new level of magical realism.

Snuggled close and wrapped up in Khephren’s arms and a couple of his tentacles, I give myself over to this experience. For the first time since that horrible, traumatic Christmas during my freshman year of college, I find myself being pulled into the wonder and the joy of the holiday. How could I not, especially knowing Khephren designed most of this experience especially for me.

I can’t believe it’s a simulation. There’s even that crisp smell of fresh snow in the air and I inhale deeply, my nostrils chilling. I turn my gaze to Khephren and take hold of his free hand, giving it a squeeze. “This is absolutely amazing. If I didn’t know we were in a simulation, I would think this is real. You’ve outdone yourself.”

Khephren flushes with pride. “I’ve worked many hours on perfecting this simulation, inspired in part by films I have seen but also my own imagination.”

I snuggle closer. “It’s wonderfully romantic.”

Fuck. It’s like the words just poured out of me before I had a chance to think about them.

Khephren stills at my side, and I hold my breath, wondering if he’ll respond to what I’ve said. However, after a moment, all he says is, “Just wait. I have something special planned for you up ahead.”

In the distance, I see a small log cabin with smoke coming from its chimney. Its exterior is decorated with garland and bows, and there’s a festive wreath on the door. The sunshine

around us slips into sunset faster than it would in the real world, and I blink. Now the light coming from inside the cabin looks warm and welcoming. When the sleigh draws to a stop in front of it, Khephren helps me down and we take our mugs inside with us.

The space is cozy and inviting. It's a small cabin, but it's got a massive fireplace with a roaring blaze that keeps the entire space toasty warm. We remove our outerwear and sit together on a loveseat by the cozy flames to warm our hands—and tentacles.

“You're amazing. I don't know how you did all this. It's so realistic and much more detailed and fantastical than the previous simulation you showed me.”

Khephren grins. “I have learned a thing or two from you, Sasha, during our time together. At first, I merely wanted to create a fun and immersive Christmas wonderland experience that my friends and I could enjoy together since we cannot actually visit Earth due to our appearance. I wanted to create something of my own to test my skills as a programmer and take my invention to the next level.” His eyes, full of determination, lock onto mine and I can't look away. “But then things changed, and I had even more incentive to make this truly special.”

I swallow, my heart pounding. “What changed?”

His gaze never leaves mine. “You did. You came into my life—”

“You were the one to abduct me. Just saying,” I interject with a grin.

He snorts. “Indeed. But it wasn't long after we met that all I could think about was you and making you happy. When I learned what happened with your family, I couldn't rest until I made sure I created a Christmas so wonderful for you that it would wash away some of the painful memories you associate with this time of year. Something that might even make you love Christmas once again.” He takes a deep breath. “When I brought you aboard this ship, I never expected to find such a connection with a being from another planet. These past few

weeks we've spent together have been so much more than I could have ever imagined."

"Me too," I whisper.

"I did it for you, Sasha." He gestures around him. "It's all for you."

My heart stutters and I feel like I can't breathe. This man is everything to me. It's now or never. I have to tell him.

"I love you!" I blurt out like an idiot, biting my tongue in the process.

Smooth, Sasha. Smooth.

His kaleidoscope eyes widen with shock but glimmer with hope. "You do?"

I try to calm my frantic heart. *Sasha, you can do this.* "I do. You're my sweet Tentacle Boy. Everything about you is precious to me. I can't imagine my life with anyone else." I reach out a trembling hand and take hold of his. "You're it for me, Khephren. I love you more than all the stars in the universe. I want to stay on the Sleigh Belle and be with you."

He rises from his seat and comes to kneel before me, outlined by the light of the fire crackling behind him. "Sasha Vasiliev, I'm in love with you too. I want you to stay with me and we will live, love, and explore the universe together."

Oh. My. God. Is this really happening? Did he say he loves me too?

I'm breathing so fast I'm nearly hyperventilating.

He kneels between my legs, a tentacle reaching up to caress my cheek while he holds both of my hands in his. "I may have abducted you, Sasha, but you have abducted all three of my hearts."

My throat constricts and I can't say anything. I'm too overwhelmed. My heart thumps loudly in my ears and feelings too big to contain swell in my chest—a sensation that is both euphoric and terrifying at the same time.

Khephren's tentacles twitch nervously. "I struggled with telling you how I feel, but I knew I'd always regret it if I didn't try." He smiles. "Thank you for being brave and telling me you love me first. It has freed me to be fully honest with you." He takes a deep breath and lets it out. "I know, all the way to the tips of my tentacles, that we are meant for one another. I love you with all of my hearts. I love your creativity and your talent, your sassy mouth, and your tender affections that you sometimes hide behind a scowl."

I chuckle through tears.

"You make my spirit soar and my tentacles tingle. With you as my partner, I believe I can do anything. There's no one else who makes me feel the way you do. I want to be with you forever."

Holy fuck. That's basically a marriage proposal.

I stare at him through a blurry sheen of tears, blinking to finally let them fall. He tenderly wipes my cheek with his tentacle.

"I want that too," I whisper. "I've never loved someone the way I love you. It takes my breath away. But, I'll be honest, it scares me too. What if it doesn't work out between us?" I hate the fear in my voice.

Khephren squeezes both of my hands and his touch calms me.

"There are no guarantees in life, especially when it comes to love. But I promise you, no matter what happens between us, I will always care for you. If you want to go back to Earth one day, I'll take you there. You have only to ask." He gives me a disarming grin. "Heck, I'll even rewrite our contract if you want and make it all legal and official."

I can't help but laugh. "You'd do that for me, even when you know Luna and Najar will want to wring your neck—or maybe your tentacles?"

Said tentacles wiggle around him. "Absolutely. I would do just about anything for you." He tilts his head, a soft smile playing on his lips. "Surely you know that by now?"

And I do.

My insecurities have been making me second-guess myself and question my feelings as well as his, even though every look he's given me and every sweet gesture he's made for me have loudly proclaimed his love for quite some time now.

Fuck my parents and the way they fucked up my head and my heart.

No more.

I take a deep breath and let it out slowly. "You're right. About everything. There are no guarantees, and I am the one taking a bigger risk here by leaving behind everyone and everything that I've ever known. But when I really think about it, I also know that I won't miss much of it. I don't have anyone or anything waiting for me back there. Before I met you, my life was on a downward spiral, and I was losing hope about it ever getting better." I chuckle and fight back more tears. "Then you waltzed into my life, full of sunshine and rainbows—and way too much Christmas cheer—and slowly made me start to feel and to hope like I haven't for years. You've helped me realize that my future and my family are right here, and I fucking love you all." I take another deep breath and make the final plunge into the unknown.

"I want to stay with you forever, too, Tentacle Boy."

With giddy movements, Khephren lifts up one of his tentacles, positioning it above us, and I glance up to see something oddly familiar attached to it.

"Is that what I think it is?"

He grins. "We don't have mistletoe on my world, but my computer assures me this plant bears a very similar resemblance in appearance."

I grin back. "It definitely does."

He licks his lips and gives me those hopeful puppy-dog eyes that slay me every time. "Let's seal our promises to one another with a kiss under the mistletoe in true Christmas fashion. At least, according to many Hallmark movies."

Something inside me lets go of the last shreds of fear, uncertainty, and insecurity that have haunted me for far too long. I don't know much, but I do know that Khephren is someone I can trust implicitly. We may not be together forever, but I think we have a better shot than most. There's something special and rare between us and I need to go all in and take a chance.

I throw myself into his arms with more force than I think even he expects and kiss him with all my might, trying to put all of my feelings for him into a lip-lock to end all lip-locks.

When our mouths meet it's different this time, slow and sensual, and full of mutual relief and joy. Kissing Khephren is like coming home; there's something so soothing and familiar in his touch. When I'm in his arms, the rest of the universe fades away, and all I know and feel is him.

I'm about ready to suggest getting naked in front of the fire and affirming our promises in another very enjoyable way when our romantic interlude is interrupted by a blaring alarm.

"Ugh. Not again," I moan, covering my ears.

Cockblocked by a computer system. *Motherfucker!*

Khephren pulls away and scrambles to his feet, then goes to a wall of the cabin and opens a secret panel that contains a control station.

"What's happening?" I ask.

His tentacles type away on the screen and within seconds the Christmas cabin and landscape around us disappear and we're back on the empty holodeck—aka the ARSE—with Luna and Najar.

I soon discover they'd been sent off to have fun in a Christmas-themed bar Khephren had created in the middle of the woods that featured a raucous Christmas party with a group of simulated characters.

"Who the fuck is interrupting our Christmas gift!" Luna stomps her feet with irritation, tentacles bristling. "I was having a damn good time."

Najar snorts. “You were trying to hook up with a simulation, Luna. She wasn’t real.”

Luna crosses her arms. “I don’t care. She felt real enough when I was kissing her. Besides, she was closer to something real than I’ve gotten in quite a long time.”

Khephren holds up his hands and several tentacles. “Stay calm, everyone. Luna, I’ll make sure we take a side trip soon to Ichonine 12 and you can hit up all of the lesbian bars you want.”

She rubs her tentacles together with glee. “I’m holding you to it, Khephren!”

I cover my ears with my hands, the blaring alarm getting to me a bit. “Lovely. Now tell me what the hell is happening right now.”

Khephren’s face hardens. “We need to head to the bridge. It seems we’re intercepting another communication from the Alliance on Earth now that we’ve reached our destination and entered into orbit around the planet.”

Luna’s eyes widen and dart between me and Khephren. “Oh shit. What are we going to do?”

My heart leaps when Khephren takes my hand and holds on tight. “We’re going to tell them the truth—that Sasha is going to stay with us from now on.”

Luna’s tentacles become a mini-tornado of movement. “Fuck yeah! Team Sleigh Belle, unite!”

Najar high-tentacles Khephren and pats me on the back. “Well done. I was worried you two idiots would both self-sabotage and fuck this up. Glad to see you got your heads out of your asses.” He squeezes my shoulder and adds more quietly, “Welcome to the family.”

I throw my shoulders back, confidence at maximum power. “All right, friends. Let’s go tell those Alliance folks not to mess with us!”



Chapter Twenty

Privately Relayed Intergalactic Communication and Knowledge System (PRICKS)

Stardate: 47634.53

DataMaster: Thank you, everyone. I found my courage to tell Sasha how I feel. It turns out he loves me too and he's staying with us!

EatMyCometDust: Fuck yeah! I knew it would all work out. *teary-eyed emoji* I'm so happy for you both.

DrWhoDaFuck: Congratulations. It was totally destiny.

DataMaster: No, it was a Christmas miracle!

NebulaNerd: Congratulations. I hope it works out for you both.

DataMaster: I couldn't have done it without you all. Your support throughout all this means so much to me.

EatMyCometDust: Of course! I just hope we all get invites to the wedding.

DataMaster: *blushing tentacle emoji* I'm not sure we're quite ready for that just yet but I hope we will be one day.

DrWhoDaFuck: Take your time. We'll be waiting to help you both celebrate when you're ready to take that step.

KHEPHREN

As I hurry to the bridge, hand in hand with Sasha, my hearts overflow with joy. Christmas is just as magical as the Hallmark movies make it out to be! I've had my

very first Christmas miracle of my own. Sasha loves me too and he's going to stay!

I feel like I'm floating without the gravity simulator. Nothing can bring me down, not even the Alliance!

That angry-looking Iyaran captain is on the screen again, a scowl on her face, but now she has a group of people with her.

“Unsanctioned vessel, I am Captain Ellie Genaro, and I demand that you return the human you abducted from Earth three and a half weeks ago.”

To my surprise, Sasha steps forward, his hands on his hips and his chin raised defiantly. “I'm Sasha Vasiliev, the human that the crew of the Sleigh Belle abducted.”

All of a sudden, a blond, curly-haired head pops into view and a young man wearing glasses very similar to Sasha's steps forward. “OMG! Hi, Sasha. I'm River Sullivan. Are you okay? These extraterrestrials haven't hurt you, have they?”

Sasha blinks at him. “River Sullivan, did you say?”

He nods, blond curls bouncing on his head.

Sasha and I stare at each other open-mouthed. What are the odds?

The love of my life turns back to the screen. “Sorry, this is really fucking surreal. Are you the same River Sullivan who writes *The Tentacular Tales of Captain Starblade*?”

The young man's cheeks flush and he pushes his glasses higher up on his nose. “The one and only.” He tilts his head. “How do you know about that?”

Sasha grins. “Talk about a *Twilight Zone* moment. Dude, you're kind of a celebrity out here in the universe. When we were going to visit the Nirvana Nebulas—”

“Oooh! Nirvana Nebulas? That sounds so cool,” River interrupts, clutching his hands to his chest and bouncing on his feet.

“They were amazing. Seriously, the most beautiful thing I've ever witnessed.” He grins and winks at me. “So far, at

least. Who knows what we'll see next.”

My tentacles flail with happiness.

River turns and gives a pointed look at the tall, dark-haired, purple-eyed Iyaran man at his side. “Did you hear that, boo? There’s so much to see out in the universe. I’m already adding the Nirvana Nebulas to my bucket list. You have to promise that I’m going to get to boldly go where no one’s gone before—except for Captain Jean-Luc Picard, of course.”

Sasha starts to laugh. “This is fucking perfect. No wonder you write that story. You’re a total sci-fi nerd, aren’t you?”

River snaps his fingers in the air. “Guilty and proud of it!”

“But you haven’t been to space yet?”

River pouts. “No. Not yet.”

“You’re totally missing out.” Sasha’s eyes go wide in realization. “Oh! You should totally visit our ship and see what Khephren’s done. It’s fucking amazing. He’s totally created a real-life holodeck!”

River’s gasp is long and loud. “Shut the front door! For real?”

“I’ve been in it. Totally epic, man.”

River turns pleading eyes and praying hands on the man at his side. “They have a freaking holodeck! Please, Boo! I need to go see this.”

The man shakes his head. “We are not going to visit an illegal vessel orbiting our planet that has abducted a human against his will. It goes against Alliance rules and regulations.”

River scowls. “Rules suck. No fair.” He gestures toward Sasha. “Besides, he doesn’t look like he’s too upset about being abducted.”

Sasha grins and steps to my side, linking his arm through mine. “Not at all. Okay, to be fair, I was a little miffed at first. But it turns out that it was meant to be.” He looks up at me, a deep well of love shimmering in his dark gray eyes. “I found

love in a very unexpected place with my very own Tentacle Boy.”

River nods his head in complete understanding. “Girl, Rihanna would be proud. Also, I hear that. Once you go tentacle, you never go back!”

It’s my turn to flush and Sasha snorts with laughter. “I think I like you, River Sullivan!” He winks. “By the way, I’ve been reading your story and I very much enjoy it. In fact, it was one of the things that gave me the courage to try tentacle sex for the first time.”

The man at River’s side groans. “Oh no. Here we go.”

River’s eyes get comically large. “OMG! My story is helping people get laid.” His elbow nudges the man at his side. “Did you hear that, Kai? I’m helping people find love and experience the joys of tentacle sex. I really am the GOAT tentacle-porn writer!”

Kai facepalms and groans again. “I’m never going to hear the end of this now, am I?”

River chortles with delight. “Never.”

Captain Ellie Genaro clears her throat, fighting back an obvious look of amusement on her face. “If we can please get back to the matter at hand here?” She turns her piercing gaze on me for a long moment before studying Sasha. “Are you trying to tell me that you do not wish to return to Earth, young man?”

Sasha clings tightly to my arm but stands firm and straight, his shoulders squared. “That’s right. Khephren and I are in love and we’re going to explore the universe together from now on.”

Ellie frowns. “You’re willing to abandon your life on Earth? Your family and friends and all of your earthly possessions?”

Sasha lets out a bitter laugh. “I don’t have anything or anyone waiting for me back on Earth, except for a whole shit ton of student loan debt and parents who disowned me years ago for being gay.”

River gasps. “How horrible! Oh, honey, I’m so sorry that happened to you.”

Ellie interjects again. “You do realize that it is considered highly unconventional to allow something like this. Have you fully thought it through? Are you sure it isn’t simply Stockholm syndrome?”

Sasha scoffs. “No, believe me, I’m in my right mind. I’ve gone over all the challenges and uncertainties a million times, but it all comes down to one thing. I love him and he loves me. This is a chance at happiness I have to hold on to.” He grins and winks up at me. “Besides, I’ve put Khephren in his place a time or two. I gave him a serious talking-to when he first brought me on the ship and had some misconceptions about species that didn’t possess tentacles as being inferior.”

I wince at the recollection of my biased ignorance.

River gasps audibly on the screen as he stares at me. “OMG. No, you didn’t!” His tone turns confidential when he shifts his attention back to Sasha. “Girl, I’ll be honest, Iyarans have tentacles too. Theirs are just hidden. But they also seem to have the whole ‘tentacles are superior’ vibe. Totally maddening, amirite?”

They nod at each other in mutual understanding.

River pauses, deep in thought. “Although, I will admit, tentacles are pretty awesome. They do offer some very nice benefits in the bedroom that I’m not going to complain about.”

Sasha nods vigorously. “Preach.”

Ellie sighs but gives River an indulgent look. It’s clear they’re connected somehow, I’m just not sure in what way.

“While I would certainly appreciate the Alliance’s approval in helping Sasha remain aboard my ship as an intergalactic immigrant from Earth,” I say, “I will be honest with you. I fully intend to keep him with me as long as he wants to remain by my side, whether the Alliance approves or not.”

Sasha takes hold of one of my tentacles, which is waving about in full defensive-protective mode, and he pats it before

giving it a gentle kiss. “I love you too, babe. I’ve got your back always.”

I turn my gaze back to Ellie and put every ounce of conviction I feel in my voice. “Sasha and I are partners, now and forever, because I fully intend to do everything within my power to keep him healthy and happy, and to make sure he never regrets his choice to stay by my side.”

“Awww,” Luna coos off to the side. “Too stinking sweet!”

An Iyaran man seated beside Ellie speaks up for the first time. “I’m Admiral Maddox Genaro, head of the Alliance of Neutral Alien Lifeforms outpost on Earth—”

Sasha interrupts. “Wait, hold up. The Alliance of Neutral Alien Lifeforms? Fucking hell! What is with extraterrestrials and their seriously unfortunate acronyms?”

River gives him a virtual high five. “Right? They didn’t even realize their acronym was ANAL until I pointed it out to them. Believe me, that’s the kind of joke that just keeps on giving. Team ANAL for the win!”

Sasha snorts. “Dude, my guy calls his holodeck an Augmented Reality Simulation Environment.”

They look at each other and cry out, “ARSE!” at the same time before dissolving into laughter.

Admiral Genaro sighs but waits for them to calm down.

“Wait,” Sasha says. “This Alliance that you’ve all been talking about is on Earth and it’s run by aliens?”

Excited, River pushes forward between the captain and admiral. “Talk about shocking, right? I was shook when I found out. I mean, it happened because I ended up trailing a new neighbor of mine all the way out into the Nevada desert because he was majorly sus, and I was convinced he was an alien. I was totally right, by the way, but when I followed him, I stumbled on a supersecret alien base in the middle of the desert. Before I knew it, they were hauling me in, trying to get information from me, and attempting a mind whammy so I’d forget they exist. Only it didn’t work because I have an impenetrable brain.” He taps his head and gives a serious nod.

“So, then they’re like, oh shit, what do we do with him? Well, they hired me and now I work for them. And I gotta tell you, it’s pretty awesome.” He wraps his arm around the stoic-looking Iyaran at his side. “It also led me to love. Now my boo and I are married!” He holds up his hand to show a ring.

“I’m surprised he managed to say all that without visibly breathing. Galactic gods can that man talk,” I mutter to Sasha.

Sasha elbows me and then blinks at the screen several times. “Holy shit. I had no idea aliens were actually living on Earth. Or that humans could marry them.”

“They’re totally incognito,” River explains confidentially. “Honestly, I was impressed at how well they’d kept themselves hidden. But Vegas is actually their secret hub, which makes total sense, amirite?”

Sasha gasps. “Fucking A. That would be the perfect place. I mean, talk about land of the weird.” He hesitates. “Although Los Angeles might give Vegas a good run for its money. I lived there for almost a decade, and it has some pretty unique residents.”

“I can believe it,” River agrees.

Sasha shakes his head slowly. “Sorry. I can’t believe I’m talking to you right now. I just learned about your story not that long ago. It’s kind of throwing me for a loop.”

River waves a hand dismissively. “Don’t worry about it. Apparently, I’m some kind of mega celebrity in the rest of the universe, but almost no one on Earth actually reads my super OTT tentacle-porn space opera. No one that’s human anyway.”

“Well, they’re missing out,” Sasha says. “I think it’s fucking awesome.”

River grins. “Thanks, man. I appreciate it. You’re one of the first humans I’ve met who actually reads it.”

They share another look of understanding.

Admiral Maddox Genaro speaks up. “If you’re quite finished, River?”

River flushes and steps back. “Sorry, Maddox. You know, I love you, Papa-in-law.”

Maddox gives him a warm smile and now I see the connection.

He continues. “While it is quite unusual for a human to be abducted and kept among an extraterrestrial species, it is not unprecedented. Every so often, a human decides to stay off-world with them.”

River gawks at him. “Holy shit, Maddox. You’ve been holding out on me. I totally want to hear more stories about alien abductees living off-planet!”

“Another time, River,” he promises and then turns his attention back to us. “I’ll work on filing the necessary paperwork and we’ll ensure that Mr. Vasiliev disappears from Earth’s records.” He turns a powerful gaze on Sasha, who gulps. “However, you need to understand that it will be no simple task to return. The more time that you’re gone, the harder it will be to explain your sudden reappearance.”

I tighten my grip around Sasha’s shoulders and squeeze him tight. “If I have my way, Sasha will be so happy and satisfied with me that he’ll never want to go back to Earth. But I have promised him that if things don’t work out between us, or if he becomes deeply homesick, I will return him here as soon as he tells me he wishes to come back. We’ve even made a legally binding contract.”

Luna and Najar groan at this but I ignore them.

“Good,” Maddox says. “Be sure to forward me a copy. I’ll send communications from time to time to check in on you both, and I expect to receive responses.”

“Of course. I appreciate that someone is willing to look out for Sasha and make sure he’s okay. I’m sad to say that his fellow Earthlings have not taken very good care of him in the past. But he has found a new family here with me and my crew, and we love him. We’ll keep him safe from here on out.”

Sasha beams up at me. “I’m ready to explore the universe and everything with you.”

River sighs dreamily. “OMG, that’s so romantic! You two are super adorable. And let me just say the whole pink vibe you have going on is amazing. It looks stunning on you. Also, I totally want to know more about your tentacles. They’re different from Kai’s—”

His husband cuts him off. “You do not need to know about another man’s tentacles.”

River looks up at the Iyaran with bright eyes and pops up on his tiptoes to kiss him on the lips. “Don’t worry, hubby-boo. Your tentacles are the only ones I truly care about, I promise. You know me and my curiosity.”

He grunts. “Damn right my tentacles are the only ones you need to care about.”

Ellie gives us her first genuine smile. “I’m not gonna lie. I’m pissed off that you invaded Earth space and abducted a human from right under our noses, but I’m glad it worked out. You two kids are really cute together. Don’t make us regret supporting you in this decision.”

Sasha and I both nod in response. “We won’t.”

“Good. Now get the hell out of here and stay safe out there.”

I don’t wait around. Letting go of Sasha, I hastily move toward my navigation seat and start typing in new coordinates to take us far away from Earth.

“It was good to meet you all,” Sasha says with a wave to the viewscreen. “Thanks for understanding.” He studies River for a moment. “You mind if I email you? We can be intergalactic pen pals.”

“Of course! I want to hear all about your adventures, especially since I’m stuck on Earth for now.”

Sasha grins. “Cool! It’d be nice to stay in touch with a fellow human who understands being in a relationship with an extraterrestrial with tentacles.”

River grins widely. “Absolutely, man. Totally email me anytime. Although, just FYI, I’m technically only half-human.

I'm actually half-extraterrestrial, but I only learned about that not too long ago. So, still coming to terms with it. But for all intents and purposes, I was raised human and that's still how I think of myself."

Sasha's eyes grow wide. "Whoa. I need to hear that story."

River winks at him. "We'll talk, friend. Good luck to you and your boo. I'm rooting for you both." He gives us a thumbs-up and then the screen goes black as they cut the transmission.

We all take our seats and I activate the light speed drive to take us on our next adventure.

After all, with Sasha at my side, the universe is the limit.



Epilogue

Eight weeks later...

SASHA

“Incoming message,” Luna says. “It’s your parents, Kheph.”

“Fuck,” he mutters.

He’s sitting in his navigation seat, so I take the opportunity to hop in his lap and wrap myself around him like a human barnacle.

Luna makes a mock gagging noise and I stick my tongue out at her. “Don’t be a jealous bitch.”

She rubs her hands together. “It’s all good. We’ll be on Ichonine 12 soon. I’m going to ditch your schmoopy asses and go get laid. Lesbian bars, here I come!”

Rambo beeps at her side and says, “Orgasms make people feel good.”

“Amen,” Luna agrees.

Khephren answers the incoming call, and his parents once again appear on the screen in front of us.

“Don’t you two look sweet?” his mom says with a pleased smile.

I snuggle closer to my Tentacle Boy. “Nice to see you again, Mrs. Thrase.”

“Lady Thrase,” she corrects gently. “And you as well, Sasha.”

Khephren's father studies us. "It seems like things are going well between you."

"We spent a very memorable Christmas together and then did a tour of the Trezalon star system. Now we're heading on a trip around the Andromeda Galaxy," Khephren replies.

His father nods, but before he can say anything further, we're interrupted by the arrival of Jonesy, trailed by six fluffy little kittens.

My baby girl wasn't getting fat while on the ship. She was pregnant. Before we knew it, she was giving birth to six little munchkins, and I was kicking myself for not getting her spayed right away when I rescued her. Khephren, Luna, and Najar have been beside themselves with delight over the kittens. Thankfully, they are more than happy to help with their overall feeding and care.

"It's a bountiful blessing from Thekmis!" Khephren's mother cries out, gazing at the kittens with awe.

"Surely you must recognize this as the sign that it is," Khephren's father says. "The goddess has blessed your union and now you must sanctify it."

My poor, sweet Tentacle Boy looks like a deer caught in headlights. Or maybe a tractor beam?

"Sounds good to me," I pipe up.

"W-what?" Khephren stutters.

I look up into his eyes as I wrap my arms around his neck. "Let's get married."

"My hopes have been answered!" his mother cheers.

He swallows thickly. "Are you sure?"

"Yep. Turns out you've abducted my heart too."

There's a wealth of emotions on his expressive face. "No doubts?"

I shake my head. "Not a one."

These past two months together have been a dream. It might be fast but I'm ready to make the ultimate commitment.

Khephren gives me a smile so bright it would put the sun to shame. "It would be my greatest honor to marry you."

"I can start planning a ceremony here," his mother says, her tentacles waving with joy.

"No," Khephren says firmly. "We're going to have a destination wedding on Rialto X."

I perk up. "Ooh! Is that the tropical planet you told me about with the purple beaches and all the delicious fruits?"

"The very one," he says.

I lay a wet kiss on his lips. "I'm so on board, baby." Some sun, sand, and sexy honeymoon times sound good to me. Fuck yeah.

He and his parents iron out details while I cuddle into Khephren's chest, truly content for the first time in many years. After they finish their communication, Khephren leans back with a sigh.

"I love them, but they can be a bit much sometimes. Thankfully, I convinced them there was no way we were having a wedding back on Draveth." He shudders.

Khephren has made it clear to me that he doesn't want to go back to his world unless it's absolutely necessary. It's not that it's a terrible place but it's part of his past that he wants to leave in the past. I totally understand that.

He gives me an adorably sappy smile. "You want to marry me, huh?"

"Fuck yeah, I do. Gotta make my claim official, Tentacle Boy."

He laughs and kisses me. "You know I love it when you call me that."

I purr with pleasure. "How about we head back to our room and—"

Suddenly, the viewscreen beeps. Again.

I groan.

“Another incoming message,” Najar says from his seat, where he’s been ignoring us while reading a book.

I’m getting to understand him a lot better already. He’s actually wonderfully bitchy and super sarcastic but in a very dry way. I have a feeling our friendship will only continue to grow over the months and years ahead.

“Please tell me it’s not my parents again,” Khephren grumbles.

Najar’s lips twitch. “I don’t think so.”

Curious, Khephren answers the viewscreen.

To our collective surprise, Captain Olgza appears on the other end with her group of traveling fans in the background.

“Hi, friends!” Luna says, waving at them with all her tentacles. “How’s that engine holding up?”

“Running nice and smooth, thank you,” Olgza says, her colorful feathers fluttering.

“To what do we owe the pleasure of this call?” Khephren asks.

I have to admit, I’m equally curious.

“We were on our way back from the Tentacular Tales Con and we heard the news!” one of the travelers shouts in the background.

Khephren and I look at each other, then back to the screen.

“What news?” I dare to ask.

“You haven’t heard?” Captain Olgza blinks at us. “*The Cat-Tacular Tales of Princess Jonesy* has gone viral on an intergalactic level. Your show is a hit!”

I nearly fall out of Khephren’s lap.

“*What?*” My voice reaches an octave I didn’t know it was capable of.

“Um…” Luna sounds weirdly subdued. “So, I may have uploaded the first two episodes on the intergalactic web.”

I stare at her. “You did *what?*”

Her tentacles squirm. “The show is so good though! I wanted to share it with others, so I uploaded the episodes to a streaming platform. I was gonna tell you, but I had no idea they’d go viral, let alone so fast!”

Khephren holds me tight. “Are you okay?”

I’m stunned is what I am.

Olgza makes an odd bird-like cawing noise and flaps her wings before settling down. “Sorry! Have we upset you with this news? We thought you’d be excited.”

I shake myself out of my daze and grin. “I am, I’m just shocked. I had no idea.”

Najar starts pulling up the streaming platform on his screen and my eyes nearly pop out of my head when I see how many likes and comments the two videos have. For once in my life, I’m speechless.

“Thank you for letting us know,” Khephren tells Olgza and her group of passengers. They shout out their congratulations and end the communication with a promise to tell all their friends back home about the show.

“Are you mad?” Luna asks, her tentacles wringing with worry.

I hop out of Khephren’s lap and wrap her up in a tight hug. Luna is fast becoming the sister I never had, and I adore her to pieces. “No, of course not. I’m just surprised. Overwhelmed. I tried for so long to get the chance to make films of my own for people to see back on Earth, and it was an uphill battle the whole time. But now, I’ve actually found an *intergalactic* audience.” I step back and rub my hands together. “You know what this means, of course?”

“What?” Luna asks.

I grin. “We’re going to make more episodes of *The Cat-Tacular Tales of Princess Jonesy!*”

“Fuck yeah,” Luna crows.

“Kill me now,” Najar says, covering his face with his hands.

Khephren chuckles. “Look at these comments, my friend. You already have a rabid fanbase that wants to see more of you in action.”

Najar groans and we all laugh.

Khephren comes to my side and pulls me into his arms, his tentacles wrapping around me for good measure. “After all this, do you believe in Christmas miracles?”

I pull him down for a kiss. “I’ll never stop believing in them ever again.”

“Good. Because I told my parents we were going to have a tropical Christmas wedding on Rialto X.”

“Sounds perfect to me.”

Rambo beeps happily. “To infinity and beyond!”

* * *

Don’t miss the bonus chapter right after this!



Bonus Chapter

Want to know what Sasha was reading to Khephren from *The Tentacular Tales of Captain Starblade*? Here it is!

Excerpt from The Tentacular Tales of Captain Starblade

“Damn you, Vardox. I thought I told you I never wanted to see you again,” Starblade said, a scowl on his ruggedly handsome face.

One of Vardox’s tentacles flicked away a piece of imaginary lint on his pristine red cloak. “Now, now, Captain. That wouldn’t be any fun, would it? And we always do have so much fun together.” Vardox lowered his voice as he took a step closer. “Besides, you can protest all you like, but I know you’ve been longing for the tender touch of my tentacles.”

Starblade’s cheeks flushed, and his eyes narrowed. “Don’t spew a bunch of space garbage out of your mouth. You’re stalking me, plain and simple, and I’m telling you to get lost. I don’t need you or your tentacles in my life!”

Vardox shrugged. “Very well, then. How foolish of me. Here I thought you might need my help. After all, there is a squadron of irate Trovids on their way to attack your ship and steal your cargo.” He reached out and patted Starblade on the shoulder. “But I see I was mistaken. You must have matters firmly in hand all by yourself. Such a brave and dashing captain.”

Vardox turned his back to Starblade and headed toward the bar in the small spaceport they had both found themselves in. A knowing grin curved his lips, revealing a hint of fang,

when he felt Starblade's warm, rough hand land on his shoulder and squeeze tightly.

"Hold on one damn minute. What do you mean?"

Vardox turned back and feigned a look of surprise. "Don't you know? It's been all over the dark web, darling. It seems you made an enemy out of the Trovids when you captured that bandit and turned him in for an Alliance bounty."

Starblade cursed. "Bala Kidgun was an unrepentant, dangerous criminal. The universe is safer now that he's behind Alliance prison walls."

Vardox tsk-tsked. "Very true, I'm sure. But he also happened to be the heir to the throne and a popular scoundrel among the Trovids. They're all quite unhappy with you, especially the royal family—and I'm afraid they have the means to hunt you down. At this very moment, they're sending a full squadron here." Vardox shook his head sadly. "I thought it rather bold of you to sit in this bar as if you had nary a care in the universe. Well, I'm sure you'll be able to concoct some fabulous plan for evading them all on your own. I'm off to grab a drink. I do hope to see you again."

Starblade scowled and ran a hand through his sandy-blond hair. "Fuck. I haven't heard a bloody thing about this."

Vardox gasped in mock surprise. "Oh, dear. Will you be able to handle them all by yourself?" He tapped his lip with a clawed finger. "Or perhaps you do need my help after all?"

Starblade crossed his muscular arms, his biceps bulging and straining against the fabric of his shirt. "You know damn well I'm gonna need your help."

"I might have been inclined to aid you before, but I received such a frosty reception that I'm just not sure there's anything in it for me now."

Starblade gritted his teeth. "What do you want in exchange for your assistance?"

Vardox stroked his chin. "Hmmm. Let me think about it."

Starblade tapped his foot irritably and Vardox had to fight to contain his glee. As usual, circumstances were working in his favor. Vardox had always been particularly gifted at being in the right place at the right time.

At this moment, directness was called for, so Vardox spoke the simple truth. "I would like another night with you. In my bed." He knew a golden opportunity when he saw one!

Starblade's face tensed and reddened with outrage. "Are you demanding sex in return for your aid?"

Vardox shrugged. "You did say I was a detestable villain. Maybe I should live up to the title."

Starblade scowled.

Vardox relented just a bit. "Fine. I will admit I'm not so uncouth as to force a partner into doing anything they don't want to do, especially in bed. Indeed, during our previous interludes together, I never once forced you into anything, my dear captain, and you very well know it."

Starblade looked away and swallowed. "Deal. I'll spend a night in your bed, but I'm not promising to do anything in it other than sleep."

Vardox grinned and held his hands open in a conciliatory gesture. "But of course, darling. I would expect nothing less." Besides, he looked forward to resuming negotiations in bed since they were often highly beneficial to him.

Two hours later, Starblade was able to leave the planet and offload his shipment safely to its destination all while evading the Trovid squadron. It had all worked out precisely as Vardox had planned it.

Lying in his bed with Starblade, Vardox couldn't hold back a smirk of satisfaction. His precious captain looked so lovely against his black silk sheets. Vardox wanted to keep him prisoner but knew he never would. No, he was playing the long game. Eventually, Starblade would be his—mind, body, and soul. But until then, Vardox would bide his time and continue to remind his sweet captain of a Masnok's skills between the sheets whenever he could.

Starblade glowered at him as he made a column of pillows between them on the bed. "Don't cross the line." His persistent scowl deepened. "And must you come to bed entirely naked?"

Vardox brushed back some of his hair and idly stroked one of his eager red tentacles, which he noted with satisfaction that Starblade stared at with equal parts wariness and longing.

"You know this is how I like to sleep. Masnoks have higher-than-average body temperatures. I get entirely too hot wearing anything when I go to bed."

Starblade swallowed hard and looked away. "I know what you're doing. You're trying to tempt me into succumbing to you, but it's not going to work."

Vardox adopted an innocent expression as he took his hardening cock in his hand. "I don't know what you mean."

Starblade licked his lips, his eyes drawn back to the sight of Vardox stroking his erection in front of him. The delectable captain couldn't look away.

One of Vardox's tentacles snaked out and circled around his own nipple and he hissed with pleasure.

"Stop that," Starblade demanded weakly.

"Don't worry, darling. I'm staying on my side of the pillow line," Vardox assured him as he slicked his other hand with the natural lubricant forming at the tip of one of his tentacles. He swapped hands for a smoother glide as he fisted his cock.

"Oh yes," he moaned. "That's better."

Starblade studied him hungrily, unable to turn away now.

Vardox was more than happy to put on a show for him if it meant luring him into joining.

"How do you do this to me every time?" Starblade whined.

"Do what, darling?"

"Seduce me every damn time!"

Vardox paused in his self-pleasuring movements. “Does that mean you care to join me, my dear captain?”

“Dark matter and damn you, but I do.”

Vardox’s eyes turned deep red with lust. “Then tell me what you want.”

Starblade swallowed convulsively several times. “I want your cock and tentacle inside me.”

“As you wish, my darling,” Vardox growled.

With pleasing alacrity, Starblade tossed aside his own clothing—and the pathetic barrier of pillows—until he lay gloriously naked next to Vardox. The human captain was far too tempting for his own good. He caused Vardox to lose his composure like no one else in the universe.

Tonight though, Vardox intended to draw out this interlude with Starblade. It had been much too long since Vardox had enjoyed having the man in his bed. His fair captain was still in denial about the power of their connection. As a Masnok who knew his instincts well, Vardox had realized Starblade was his mate when they first met. That exquisite night together, when Starblade had no clue as to Vardox’s real identity, had made the truth of the matter abundantly clear to Vardox.

What had been even more obvious was the fact that Vardox’s mate was more stubborn than a Masnok mule, refusing to acknowledge Vardox as anything more than a sometimes bed partner. But that did not put Vardox out. Indeed, quite to the contrary. As a Masnok in his prime, Vardox relished a challenge, and he possessed infinite patience when pursuing his quarry. It was merely a matter of time before Vardox made Starblade his in every way a Masnok did with their one true mate.

Meanwhile, Vardox would do everything in his power to bring Starblade’s body the pleasure it craved. Beneath his brash bravado, Starblade was a sexually submissive man who yearned for Vardox’s controlling touch. In that respect, they were perfectly matched.

Vardox rose to his knees on the bed, his tentacles thrashing at his side, eager to touch their precious captain, but he restrained himself.

“Get on your hands and knees facing away from me, darling.” Although his words were soft, the note of command in his voice made Starblade shiver before hastily complying.

Vardox reached out a clawed hand and ran it gently down the luscious curve of Starblade’s ass cheek. The human captain was muscular all over, with thick thighs and arms, but his ass remained perfectly rounded, and Vardox enjoyed pampering and torturing it in equal measure.

With perverse pleasure, Vardox decided he was going to edge his dear captain until he was a frenzied and needy mess this evening.

They would both enjoy it immensely.

Kneeling behind Starblade, Vardox whipped out four of his tentacles to hold the man in place. Two twined around his arms while the others wrapped around his thighs and spread his legs farther apart.

“Ah, yes. This is just how I love to see you, my sweet.”

Starblade glared over his shoulder at him. “Get on with it, will you?” he snarled.

Vardox snorted softly. “Now, now, my dear captain. Don’t rush me when I’m admiring your lovely body. I want to savor this moment.”

With a huff, Starblade turned away and buried his face in the sheets.

Vardox chuckled. His mate was so predictable sometimes.

Using his hands, Vardox carefully pulled Starblade’s ass cheeks apart, exposing his sensitive hole to Vardox’s lusty stare. Starblade’s muscles went rigid.

“What the hell are you doing back there?” he demanded.

“Looking my fill. Your hole is quite pretty and so eager for me.”

One of Vardox's naturally lube-slicked tentacles came forward and began to rub its wet tip against the edges of Starblade's entrance, cutting off the captain's protest.

"What was that, darling?" Vardox asked cheerfully.

"Damn you! Fuck me with your tentacle right now!"

Said tentacle pulled back and gave one cheek a firm smack, leaving a faint pink mark in its wake.

Starblade bucked and moaned.

Vardox positioned his body over Starblade's back while his tentacle went back to work on the man's hole. "Naughty captain. You know what happens when you talk back to me when we're in bed together. Did you do that just so I'd spank you?"

Starblade wriggled and gasped as Vardox's tentacle slowly began to enter him, getting him ready for Vardox's cock.

"Yes, damn you." Starblade gritted out between clenched teeth.

Vardox ran his claws lightly down his mate's back and Starblade shuddered.

"We're perfect for one another, my sweet. You'll understand that one day," Vardox whispered.

"Never!" Starblade choked out. "Now fuck me." He paused before adding, "Please."

Vardox made certain that his tentacle found Starblade's prostate and began to massage it with relentless enthusiasm.

"Galactic gods!" Starblade cried. "So close."

Now that wouldn't do.

Vardox sent one of his other tentacles to wrap around the base of Starblade's cock.

His mate let out a high-pitched noise of displeasure. "No! I was so close, you bastard."

"Using pet names with me already, darling? How lovely," Vardox drawled. "However, I can't have you coming too soon."

I've barely gotten started."

Starblade struggled against Vardox's hold on him.

Using his much larger body, Vardox wrapped himself around his mate and began to rub his erect, ridged cock between Starblade's ass cheeks while his tentacle continued to loosen him up.

"Here, tonight, you are mine, my dearest captain. Let yourself go. Submit to me the way we both know you want to."

Starblade's body thrashed under him once more and then went slack and acquiescent in his arms. Vardox's strong tentacles kept him in place.

Licking a stripe down Starblade's back, Vardox purred with pleasure. "Such a good captain."

His mate moaned and rocked his hips in time with Vardox's tentacle thrusting inside him. Meanwhile, his tentacle around Starblade's erection served as an effective cock ring to keep the man from coming too soon.

Before long, however, Vardox's own need became all-consuming, and his infamous control was beginning to waver. No one tempted him like Starblade did.

Slowly removing his tentacle from his sweet captain's hole, Vardox aligned his thick, turgid erection with Starblade's entrance.

"I'm going to fuck you now, darling," he said.

"Yes!" Starblade gasped and then muttered, "About time."

So wonderfully naughty!

Vardox smacked his other ass cheek with a tentacle, making Starblade gasp.

Before he had a chance to recover, Vardox pressed inside him.

His tentacle had done a good job in preparing his partner and he eased in smoothly, feeling the exquisitely tight heat of Starblade's channel wrap around him in a vise-like grip.

Vardox's fangs descended, as he growled out, "You take me so well, my darling." He rubbed Starblade's back as he praised him, knowing how much his mate loved this even when he feebly protested otherwise. "You feel heavenly wrapped around me so tight."

Starblade couldn't hold back a sob of pleasure. "I'm so damn full. You're fucking huge."

"All the better to please you with, dearest," Vardox purred.

When he felt Starblade's passage relax ever so slightly around him, he began to move his hips, starting with a shallow rocking motion back and forth. Before long, however, they were rutting against one another with primal, animalistic need. Starblade pushed back into each of Vardox's wild thrusts with a beautiful eagerness that stole Vardox's breath.

Vardox kept his attention focused on his partner, and when he recognized the signs that Starblade was nearing the end of what he could tolerate, Vardox acted accordingly.

"You've been such a good captain. It's time for your reward."

Shifting position, Vardox straightened behind Starblade as his tentacles lifted him into an upright kneeling position. Continuing his thrusts, Vardox lightly wrapped a hand around Starblade's throat, tilting his head back to him.

"Oh gods," Starblade moaned.

Vardox grazed his fangs against the side of Starblade's neck before running his forked tongue over it. His tentacle around the base of Starblade's cock loosened and began to pump his erection instead. "I want you to come now. Then I'm going to come inside you and give you everything I have. That's what you want, isn't it? My hot spunk filling you up and then gushing out of your pretty little hole?"

"Fuck, yes," Starblade rasped, pressing his back against Vardox and moaning.

Vardox's tentacle jacked Starblade's cock while he pounded into him from behind, nailing his prostate with deliberate intent.

Within moments, Starblade stiffened in his grip, his cock erupting and sending spurts of seed on the bedsheets.

Vardox's own release hit him with the force of a warp drive transition, leaving him momentarily breathless as he came in hot waves inside his mate's tight, perfect channel.

They stayed like that, pressed together and panting in time with one another as they rode out the lingering traces of pleasure still thrumming through their bodies.

Later, when Vardox's cock began to soften, he pulled out and laid Starblade's now limp body on the bed before spooning him from behind. His tentacles brushed back his mate's sweaty hair and petted him all over.

"That was spectacular, my dear. Do you feel better now?"

Starblade stirred in his arms and turned to face him, obvious conflict warring on his countenance. "Yes, dammit. But you know this will never work. Not the way you want it to. Sure, we're good in bed—"

Vardox huffed indignantly. "More than good, my fair captain. We are magnificent together in bed."

Starblade rolled his eyes. "Whatever. There's more to having a relationship than fucking."

Vardox studied his mate's stunning blue eyes and laid all his cards on the table, so to speak. "Indeed. I am ready and willing to give you everything if you are brave enough to take it."

Starblade looked away. "I can't."

Vardox gave a mental sigh. It was too soon. He would just have to keep working on helping his mate see what was so obvious to the rest of the universe.

"As you wish. I would never force you, darling." Vardox rose from bed and shrugged into his cloak. "I will see you back to your ship."

Starblade stared at him in confusion, his blond hair a wild mess after their lovemaking. "What do you mean?"

Vardox shrugged. “We’ve had sex. You’ve made it clear you aren’t interested in anything more. It seems your purpose here is done.”

For a moment, Starblade looked unexpectedly vulnerable. “But I thought you wanted to spend the entire night with me.”

Vardox arched an eyebrow. “You wish to sleep here?”

Starblade flushed. “Not especially. But it is...late. And I’m tired.”

Fighting a grin, Vardox strolled back to bed and dropped his cloak onto the floor. “All right, then. Let’s get some sleep.”

Starblade snuggled into his arms and sighed. “Yes. I’ll go back to my ship tomorrow.”

“As you wish,” Vardox whispered, his mind already plotting other strategies for wearing down Starblade’s defenses.

After all, a Masnok will do just about anything to be with their mate.

* * *

Want to know more about River Sullivan, *The Tentacular Tales of Captain Starblade*, and the Alliance for Neutral Alien Lifeforms on Earth? Be sure to check out Chloe Archer’s Tentacular Tales series!

Tentacular Tales Series

[It’s Not Unusual To Be Loved by an Alien](#) (Tentacular Tales #1)

[A Very Tentacular Christmas](#) (Tentacular Tales #1.5)

[Can’t Help Falling in Love with an Alien](#) (Tentacular Tales #2)

[When a Man Loves an Alien](#) (Tentacular Tales #3)

[All You Need is Alien Love](#) (Tentacular Tales #4)

Like M/M paranormal and monster romance? Check out Chloe’s *Monsters Hollow* stories:

The Orc and the Manny: A Cozy M/M Monster Romance
(Monsters Hollow #1)

The Gargoyle and the Romance Writer: A Cozy M/M Monster Romance (Monsters Hollow #2)

The Bogeyman and the Schoolteacher: A Cozy M/M Monster Romance (Monsters Hollow #0.5)



Author's Note

This story contains some content that might be upsetting to some readers including abduction, references to being disowned by one's family because of one's sexual orientation, religious intolerance, mention of depression and suicidal thoughts in the past, and mention of the loss of a beloved grandparent. The bonus chapter at the end contains some light BDSM kink elements.

About the Author

Chloe Archer writes M/M sci-fi and paranormal rom coms with laugh out loud humor because she's all about bringing the funny-sexy back. Oh, yeah!

She currently calls Minnesota home, but has lived abroad in places like Montreal, Edinburgh, and Tokyo. She's hoping to relocate to Scotland permanently in the next few years if the stars align.

Chloe is a fur mama to two adorable Yorkies, Jasper and Teddy, and she loves them in a crazy dog mama kind of way. When she isn't busy writing, she enjoys visiting friends and family, traveling, reading, binge watching movies and TV shows, and practicing her karaoke skills. She does a mean cover of Pat Benatar and Cher, or so she's been told.

For more books and updates visit:

www.chloearcher.com

* * *

If you'd like to keep up to date with all of Chloe's latest news, cover reveals, free short stories, and more please be sure to [sign up for her newsletter](#).