

MY CHRISTMAS ALIEN MATE

A SCIFI ALIEN ROMANCE

BELLA BLAIR

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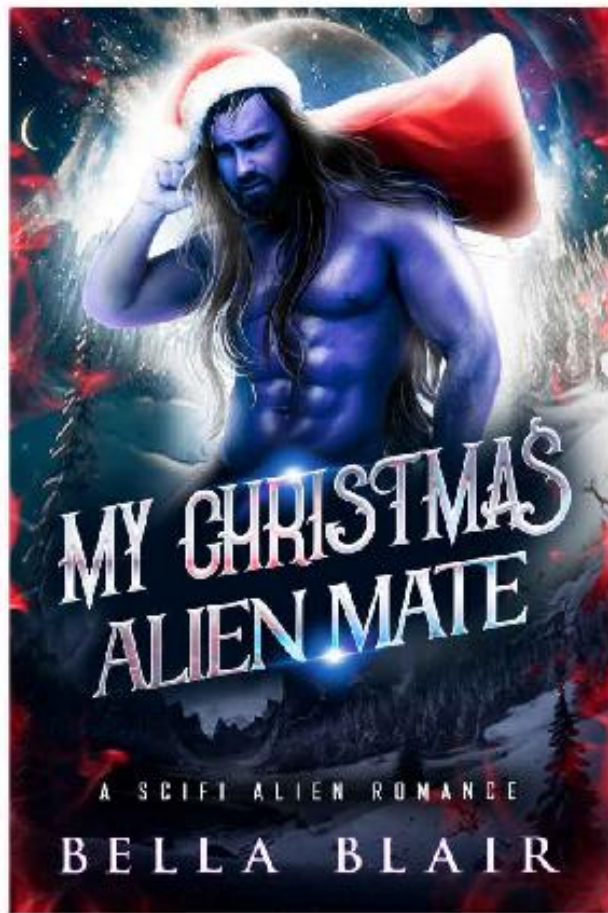
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DONE. ALL I HAD left to do was connect the extension cords and see if my decorating job came even close to Grampa's from last year.

Grampa. As always, tears stung my eyes at the thought of the man who had been like a father to me. Not only had I lost him, but now I was about to lose my home as well, the pain of it was raw and constantly on my mind.

My fingers holding the ends of the extension cords trembled at the memory of the past few months. This year had definitely been a year from hell. It had taken everything from me. My family, my home, and any security I had ever known.

With a shuddering inhale, I pushed the ends of the cords together and was rewarded with the sight of the old cottage coming to life under the soft glow of hundreds of sparkling Christmas lights. It wasn't exactly a *Clark Griswold* moment, but it was close to what Grampa had done every year.

Twinkling icicle lights ran down the eaves of the slanted roof, over the pop out bay window, the entrance door, which I forgot to close, and the four visible windows emanating a low yellow glow from within.

A pine tree and several scrubs had also been decorated with holiday lights glowing warmly over a blanket of snow.

It was hard to believe that this would be my last Christmas here. I had never been away from this place, except for when I went to college, but never for Christmas, or any other major holidays. After New Years, I would have to pack up and leave.

Where to was anybody's guess.

No, I promised myself I wouldn't think about this for the next couple of weeks, not until after Christmas. This time was for me and my memories of Grampa and this place.

Snow crunched underneath my boots while I walked back to the cabin to finish setting up the last of the decorations. Before I even reached the entrance, warmth from the fire in the hearth at the end of the small family room greeted me.

This place still smelled of Grampa's old pipe, sitting untouched on a small round table next to his favorite recliner, facing the fireplace and the rather oversized TV, the only modern gadget Grampa had taken to and had allowed himself to splurge on.

All his other income was spent on me and my education.

At least he was there when you graduated, a small voice whispered when my eyes fell on my diploma that Grampa had

proudly hung up on the wall. *At least we had that.*

The smell of the spiced tea I had prepared before I went outside tickled my nose, and I filled a cup with the concoction Grampa and I had come up with. Our secret recipe: sliced oranges, cloves, laurel leaves, clover, honey, and a small pinch of Captain Morgan, which I admittedly made more generous than he had usually allowed. But damnit, I needed something to chase the chill from my bones that had nothing to do with the freezing temperatures outside and everything to do with my sense of loneliness and abandonment.

I grabbed one of the many blankets from the couch, turned off all the lights, and moved to the enclosed back porch. The door protested on its hinges when I opened it to get back out into the cold.

It always got dark early here in the winter months, something I came to appreciate more the older I got.

Civilization hadn't spread this far into the mountains or this lake yet, so it was just me for miles on end. Probably because there were other, larger lakes all around the mountains.

Earlier today, I had felt lonely by myself in the cabin, but strangely, out here, walking onto the long pier my grampa had built, I didn't feel lonely anymore at all.

The lake lay still like a black tarmac before me and the moon had risen a few finger spans over the horizon and reflected its distorted image on the water's surface. A gazillion stars were visible against the cloudless night sky. Mesmerized, I stared at the twinkling lights. I remembered asking Grampa once, when

I was a kid, if all the angels had hung their Christmas lights up in the sky and he told me, *yes, every night*.

Tall, dark pine trees stood to my right all around the lake and snowcapped mountains to my left. This place was the picture of perfection. Always had been. All my life this had been my constant, a place I thought I would always return to. In my minds' eye I had dreamed of spending summers and Christmases here with my children one day.

A shadow flying over me and a familiar huhu-huhu announced a large owl before I saw its black form fly through the night sky. *How fucking perfect can this night get*, I wondered, while taking a large sip of my spiced concoction and noticing that it was already cooling. Probably telling me it was time to go back in, call it a night, but for some reason, I stood frozen at the end of the pier, staring into the night like I had done a thousand times with Grampa, wishing he were here.

A shooting star raced across the dark sky, but I didn't make a wish, because I knew the only one that mattered to me would never be fulfilled by anybody. So instead, my eyes just followed the object as it flew in a wide arc over the lake. Instead of burning out though, it seemed to become brighter and bigger, closing in on me.

My cup fell from my hand and landed with a splash in the dark water to my right when I realized the object was still coming at me and there was nowhere for me to go. Even if I somehow managed to outrun it and make it to the cabin, I was

sure it would crash right into it. *A fitting end*, I thought cynically, only half concerned that I would die.

Suddenly, the object dropped. One second it was coming full speed at me, the next, it just stopped dead in its tracks and dropped straight into the lake.

Ice-cold water sprayed me from head to toe as the water had suddenly been displaced by... what exactly? A meteorite?

Meteorites didn't drop on a dime. Not like that.

Besides, for how large the thing had been and how fast it had been going, there should have been a tsunami coming at me, not this... pathetic little splash. I had gotten wetter by friends jumping into the water than this.

Not that I wasn't soaked, I was, but still.



THE SHIP MANEUVERED JUST like advertised. Never had I flown something like the XT4J before. After I left the hangar, she made hyperspeed within seconds.

For a while, I enjoyed autopilot mode but soon switched back to manual to get a feel for her flexibility. Full speed, I raced her back to the flagship, pulling her up short in front of the main viewing screen, certain the only reason they didn't shoot me down was because my father was on deck cursing me to all the gates of hell.

I should have been an officer like him, like my older brother, but frankly, I lacked the discipline and temperament for such a position. I had tried, just to get the two most important males in my life off my back, but all three of us had soon agreed it was better for all of us if I returned to doing what I did best: taking what they called high risks. I preferred to think of it as calculated risks, like testing out this newest addition to my father's fleet on its very first test flight.

Was it smart taking her to the brink of her capabilities on her maiden voyage? Probably not. Should I have done it? Definitely not. Had I done it? Absolutely.

Next, I took her up into a steep climb before I ordered her to make a sharp turn and dive back down toward the flagship, this time giving the large cruiser a wide berth, not wanting to aggravate my father any more than I already had. Even I knew the beast could only be provoked so far.

“I think that was enough for her first flight, Captain Ghar-Huhn,” High Commander Ghar-Huhn’s—my father’s—voice came through the speakers.

“Ah, where is your sense of adventure, Father?” I teased.

I could hear his sigh in my head even though it didn’t come through the speaker. No, my father had much too much decorum to show his feelings in front of his crew.

“She is a prototype, Captain. That’s enough for today. Return to base.”

I, however, had no problem with showing emotion, so I let out an exaggerated sigh that would probably be heard all over the bridge. “As you wish, High Commander.”

“It’s not a wish but an order,” my father barked.

“Aye, sir,” I acknowledged and pressed the required sequence into the command pad by my fingertips to make the XT4J turn.

As expected, my brother Adred awaited me in the hangar as soon as the air was balanced, and I climbed out of my fighter.

“Does she feel as good as she handles?” Adred asked.

Adred could be as stiff as my father—military life did that to a person, I supposed—but he and I had spent enough time with one another that I had somewhat rubbed off on him.

Which he proved just now, as his eyes admiringly roamed over the XT4J’s sleek hull, not hiding how much he itched to fly her.

“Better,” I grinned. “Maybe once the crazy test pilots like me work all the kinks out and deem her safe, Father will allow you to fly her too.”

He smacked me upside the head. “You’re such a smartass.”

I chuckled. “Love you too, bro.”

Adred shook his head. “Come, I’ll buy you a round.”

“Not gonna say no to that. I might be risking my life as a test pilot, but it pays piss poor.”

Adred rolled his eyes, knowing full well that I had equal access to our mother’s inheritance and didn’t want for anything.

“Sooooo,” I dragged the word out as soon as we sat across from each other, holding a full glass of the meanest spirits credits could buy in front of us. “What about that D-Class planet we’ve been orbiting for two full shifts now?” A full shift for us equaled roughly one day/night rotation for the inhabitants of the planet we were circling at a safe distance.

“What about it?” Adred took a long drink of the vile brew they called spirits aboard the flagship.

I shrugged. “Just curious.”

“We’re still gathering data from it, but it seems the most technologically evolved sentient population on D-1/4-5289d11 may have satellites in orbit but has yet to develop fully functional spaceflight.”

D stood for the size and technological evolution of a planet, with Z equaling the planet that was the main seat of the Galactic Union. If at all possible, the Galactic Union avoided making contact with these kinds of worlds until they reached at least M status. The statuses were assigned by different qualification measurements, not all having to do with technological advancement. The planet’s inhabitants were judged by many different qualities. For example, if different races or species inhabited the world, how well did they get along, were they still warring with one another? Had the entire planet unified yet? Were the indigenous intellectual levels further apart than forty points from one another? And so on.

Adred looked at me curiously. “Why are you so interested?”

“Is Father thinking about sending scouts out?” I counter questioned.

“Bored with your new toy already?” he shot back.

I shook my head. “Hardly. Still, the planet intrigues me.”

Adred leaned back in his chair. “How so?”

I shrugged. It was hard to explain, but over the course of the last two full shifts, I had found myself gravitating to windows from which I would have a perfect view of the blue planet enveloped in white clouds. It was a pretty world.

“Maybe I’m just itching to explore something new.”

“Hm,” Adred grunted, finishing his drink and waving at the drone to bring another round.

I drank mine down and suppressed a shudder. This stuff was vile. “Well, what do you think my chances are of Father allowing me to go down there?”

“First, we don’t even know yet if we’ll be sending scouts down,” Adred said. “Second, null. He’s not going to allow you to go until we figured out what kind of diseases we’re dealing with.” He shrugged. “We’re not even sure yet the planet is worth exploring.”

I crossed my arms over my chest, mulling his words over. When I forfeited my right to become a high ranking officer in the Galactic Union’s military forces, I lost the right to sit on the council that would decide if D-1/4-5289d11 was worth the credits it would cost to explore it further. Not that this was something that fell into the realm of responsibility in my father’s fleet anyway.

The fleet was supposed to patrol, to make the Galactic Union’s reach known, intimidate and provide stability for its members, not explore alien planets.

Since we came across it though, it was up to the council to decide whether we would use this stop to explore or send scouts out later.

“Will you vote for it?” I asked, wondering if he would vote for exploration.

“It doesn’t matter to me one way or another,” he squinted his eyes at me. “Since it seems to matter to you though, I will consider it.”

“Thank you. I’ll owe you one.”

“You owe me more than one,” he winked.

“Don’t I know it.” I smirked.

After we finished our drinks, we went into the officer’s mess hall to grab a bite to eat and separated once my father called me into his office, undoubtedly to chew me out over my stunt with the XT4J earlier. I grinned. I always liked a good powwow with him.



I DIDN'T UNDERSTAND WHY I just stood there, unmoving, staring at the water as it slowly returned to the calm surface it had been before something hit it.

Dripping wet and freezing, there was no sense in standing there unless I was begging to catch a cold.

At first, the ripple in the water was so small that I barely noticed it, but it grew steadily until I realized that I was staring at somebody swimming.

“Hey!” I called, waving my arms and jumping into the air to make my five-foot-two frame taller. “Over here!”

The ripples stopped, and a head turned my way. Still thinking that there was a strong possibility that my mind had been playing tricks on me and the object that had hit the water was nothing more than a downed helicopter, I kept calling out to the stranger, who I assumed to be the pilot, who was lucky enough to have gotten out of the craft.

Unfortunately, during my frantic waving and jumping, I forgot that I already stood at the very edge of the pier, and with my next hop, I overstepped, my foot landed on thin air, and I lost my balance.

For one moment, I felt suspended in time, as if my body and gravity were giving my mind plenty of time to prepare myself for the inevitable plunge into the ice-cold lake water. But then it happened way too quickly. One moment my arms windmilled, getting more entangled in the blanket I had snatched off the couch before coming out here, and the next instant I was falling toward the deep, dark water.

At first, I felt nothing as my body was pulled under the surface and I began my slow descent to the bottom of the lake, but then my entire body was assaulted at once by needle sharp pinpricks all over. My mouth opened in an involuntary scream but thankfully, as soon as I tasted the water, I closed it before taking the instinctive deep inhale to prepare for a scream, otherwise I would have probably died right then.

The blanket's weight pulled me deeper into the water, no matter how hard I kicked and flailed my still cartwheeling arms in an effort to disentangle myself from the blanket that was turning into a shroud, entrapping and suffocating me.

Nothing had ever felt as heavy as that blanket or hurt as badly as the freezing water. Even though it wasn't my first time diving into its frigid embrace during the winter months, but the last time one of my friends had dared me was more

than twelve years ago. Plus, I had never been as encumbered as now.

My feet hit the squishy ground, and I automatically bent my knees to catapult myself back up, but again, the blanket stopped me. Becoming frantic now, I fought to free myself while my lungs began to burn with the need for oxygen exaggerated by the panic clawing at my mind.

I managed to get one arm free while the heavy material continued to pull me to the bottom of the lake.

With sudden clarity, I realized that despite how sad and shitty my life had become during the last few months, I wanted to live it. I wasn't ready to join my grampa yet, no matter how much I missed him. *Damnit*, I cursed the blanket as I finally managed to free my other arm, only to find myself in a new predicament. While wrangling with the blanket, I lost contact with the lakebed and with near absolute darkness surrounding me from all sides, I had no idea where up or down was.

I blindly kicked my legs and moved my arms, only to have my hands hit hard ground, and I realized I had swum down instead of up.

My mouth twitched, my lips wanted desperately to open and gulp in air. My lungs burned, demanded oxygen, not seeming to understand that instead of the vied for O₂, they would receive dirty lake water and drown me.

My hands began to flail in earnest as my limbs became heavy with fatigue, and I blinked my eyes a few times, trying

to focus. Never had I experienced this kind of need, this kind of burning, and I found myself swallowing water as my lungs closed automatically.

Suddenly, strong hands encircled my waist and a hard body pressed itself against me from behind, propelling us both up to the surface.

My body jerked and spasmed under his firm grip, but he didn't let go of me and it felt as if he was mentally telling me to hold on. *Hold on.*

Which was what I told my lungs, *hold on, just a moment longer, hold on.*

The second we broke through the surface, I took in a deep, tortured breath. It hurt worse than anything before, but also felt incredibly good as life slowly returned to my limbs. With it, the awareness of the water's freezing temperature and thousands of pricking needles on my skin returned. I didn't mind though because the pain reminded me that I was alive.

With sure strokes, my unknown rescuer took us back to the pier where he pushed me up onto the rough wooden boards before he swung himself up next to me.

Large hands moved up and down my arms, my body, as he massaged life and warmth into me.

"Thank you," I managed in a hoarse voice. "Thank you so much."

My ears must not have worked very well yet, because whatever he answered in his deep voice, I didn't understand,

as if he were speaking a different language.

“My house...” I managed to lift my arm and point in the direction of my darkened home. I had turned all the lights off earlier so they wouldn’t interfere with my stargazing, but now it was hard to see against the darkness.

He uttered some words I failed to understand, and I pointed again, “My house... warm clothes...” My teeth chattered so hard, they made it hard to get the words out, and I feared they would break.

I tried to stand up, but my legs wouldn’t allow me to rise from the wood where I lay panting.

Incredible tiredness overcame me, and I thought that lying here on the wood, staring at the night sky wasn’t really all that bad. It could have been warmer, but I was so, so tired that I really didn’t care that much.

Strong hands moved around me, picked me up, and I was snuggled against the widest chest in the history of the world, which emanated a strange heat. It was weird because he had just been in the water like me, so he should be just as cold, not this oven.

He repeated the same strange word, and I decided he was asking me for directions, so I lifted my tired arm again and pointed in the general direction of my cabin. “The-here.” I chattered.

I looked up to see my rescuer, but he was shrouded in darkness, except... no that had to be an illusion. No man’s

eyes burned red. Right?

Amber, I told myself reasonably, you just had a near-death experience, you're seeing things.

Still, I blinked a few times and swallowed. No, there was definitely a red glow where his eyes should be.

Alright, think logically, I advised myself. He crashed in a helicopter, he's probably wearing some kind of pilot helmet or goggles or whatever.

Yes, that made perfect sense. I turned my gaze to make out where we were and warned, "Care-eful, ste-eps," just as my hero stumbled over the first.

With a low grumbled curse, he adjusted me, and we made it up the few stone steps and on to the path that led to my cabin, which was slowly taking on shape.

He didn't seem to know how to open the glass door leading into the enclosed patio, so I turned in his embrace to grab the doorhandle, assuming he had to be freezing as badly as me if he couldn't figure out how to operate a door, and my heart went out to the man holding me who had been so strong up until now.

"Almo-host the-here." I chattered as he found the door leading into the house and this time managed to turn the handle and open the door. Welcome warmth and a soft glow from the fireplace greeted us and revived me slightly.

He muttered some more strange words, and I wondered if he was from a different country because I still didn't understand a

word he said, which, even in my frozen mind, I realized could be bad. Was he a spy?

I twisted in his arms to reach the light switch and, as if grasping what I was trying to do, he accommodated my movements until I found the switch. Warm light flooded the room, and I looked up to thank my rescuer again, but my throat tightened up at the sight of him.

He was blue!

From head to toe, or at least from the skin I could see underneath some kind of tight, black clothing that didn't even look wet. Neither did his long black hair or beard.

Red glowing eyes took me in just as curiously as I was taking him in. Well, that wasn't quite right. He was staring at me curiously, while fear crept up through my cells, actually warming me, and I scrambled. Moving my arms and legs, I forced him to let go of me.

Blue?

I blinked a few times, wondering if I had lost a few of my brain cells in the lake, or maybe he was frozen blue from the water? Didn't people turn blue when they froze?

I wasn't sure, but I was positive that nobody turned *that* blue.

"Who are you?" I blurted out. Even my teeth had stopped chattering as my adrenaline spiked, warming me even more than the room.

“Do not fear, Earthling, I’m not here to harm you,” he said in a deep voice, and that was the last I heard, because suddenly the room spun around me, and I didn’t even have a chance to giggle at his ridiculous words before I crumbled in on myself and lost consciousness.



I BARELY MANAGED TO catch the indigenous female before her body hit the strange floor. My father's words echoed in my head, *You are, under no circumstances, to make contact with the indigenous people.* Oh well, he should have known I didn't follow orders well.

What was I supposed to do anyway? Let the female drown? I was sure that would have violated more Galactic Union rules than rescuing her.

Now my father had another faux pas of mine to lord over my head. Especially after I wrangled permission to scout D-1/4-5289d11 from him a few full shifts ago. My desire to visit this alien planet had inexplicably grown with each hour, and I made a few promises to my father to gain permission to be the first and, so far, only scout to get more intel about D-1/4-5289d11.

Just as ordered, I found a desolate spot in the middle of nowhere and landed the prototype ship XT4J in a large lake to keep it hidden. How was I supposed to know that in the midst

of the breathtaking woods and mountains, I would encounter a lone native female?

Her little house had perfectly blended in with the surrounding area and had evaded even the newest radar technology on the XT4J, not to mention her small frame which I now realized must have stood on the wooden bridge running into the lake.

I should have probably changed my appearance into something more fitting for this planet, but one, I had been busy with a rescue mission, and two, besides her, I had no idea what the other inhabitants of D-1/4-5289d11 looked like, making it hard to instruct my transformer to disguise me.

The look on her face before she lost consciousness had made it clear that my appearance had more than unsettled her though.

I carefully laid her out on the couch before I curiously looked around the dwelling she lived in. It was small, but cozy and clean. Heat emanated from a square opening in the wall surrounded by rock, in which flames consumed something obviously burnable. The resulting smoke was redirected via a large funnel, most likely going through the roof and out into the night. The smell coming from it wasn't unpleasant, but foreign to my nose.

A distinct chattering sound made me turn back to the female, and I noticed that she was shivering and her teeth clattering against each other produced the noise I heard. Curiously, I cocked my head to take her in. She was small and sinfully

curved in just the right places, making my unruly cock stir. Long, medium brown hair hung wet around her face, urging me to comb it back from where it was plastered to her skin—very cold skin as I found out when I gave in to the urge. Too cold?

Her anatomy seemed similar to that of us Scekyns, but since we hadn't made any contact with her species yet, I had no knowledge about the inner workings of her body.

I wasn't an idiot though. She was wet from head to toe after falling into what I assumed was a cold lake to her. A quick swipe with my hand materialized my data processor in front of me, and I barked some orders. "I need a temperature readout from the surrounding area and objects."

Within the blink of an eye, my screen filled.

Lake: 58

Outside air: 42

Inside Air: 65

Fire: 98

Indigenous Female: 72

Given this data, it wasn't hard to figure out that the female was close to freezing.

First, I decided I needed to get her out of the wet clothing, but hesitated, wondering how she would take it when she realized I had undressed her.

I sighed, she was freezing and I needed to do something.

Hoping she would forgive me, I moved to her boots first, which turned out to be the easiest to come off. A small lake of water poured out when I tossed them to the side, and with another sigh, I realized I would have to dry this off later, since it was just her and me here.

Her clothing proved more difficult. Not only did all the material cling to her like a second skin, but I couldn't figure out how the little buttons and hooks worked, and I ended up ripping most of her attire.

I tried to be a gentleman and not notice how full her breasts were and how pert her nipples stood up, when they were fully exposed, but I was only a male tasked with a hard job and succumbed to the temptation more than once—speaking of hard, my cock was the hardest it had been in a long time and didn't listen to any of my repeated commands to stay down.

I found a blanket underneath a pillow and sighed again, this time in relief, after I wrapped her body up in it. For good measure, I rubbed her arms and legs—trying hard not to admire how long and firm they were—up and down to reawaken her circulation.

I had never done anything like this before, temperature fluctuations were not an issue for my species unless it moved to extreme heat or cold. Luckily, there were other species in the Galactic Union who were more temperature sensitive than us Scekyns and part of my training included how to take care of them in the event of any of them being exposed to an unfavorable environment, like it seemed this female had.

Carefully, I laid her head on a pillow but realized her wet hair soaked through the material in no time. With a fourth sigh, I moved to explore her dwelling some more, hoping to find another blanket or something to dry her hair with.

The first door I encountered led into a primitive bathroom, where I discovered smaller thicker blankets and grabbed one to wrap around her head. My eyes fell on a pile of discarded clothing on the floor and two small objects stood out, which appeared to be some kind of cozy foot coverings. I grabbed them and was more than happy when they fit on her tiny feet.

I took a moment to massage them first, finding them even colder to the touch than the rest of her, and admired her orange-colored toenails, tiny toes—five of them—and her delicate ankles, before I put the foot coverings on them. Then I tugged them underneath the blanket and even went so far as to stuff the overhanging material under her feet. That should keep her warm.

A soft noise coming from her lips made me turn and study her face, which looked paler than the skin on the rest of her body, with a slightly bluish tint. While looking for the bathroom a few minutes ago, I spotted a flat likeness of her and an older male of her species. In that picture, the color of her skin had been rosier with a golden hue, and I began to worry that her plunge into the lake might have made her sick. Her species seemed fragile, not just because of her tiny size, but her skin was incredibly soft, softer than any I had touched before.

Even the lips which were pink in the picture looked now more bluish gray.

For a moment, I contemplated taking her up to the flagship to have her tested to ensure she was okay, but dismissed that idea for two reasons, one, once she was up there, I didn't think my father would allow her to return to her planet, and two, our healing pods were not programmed for her species yet. They would only experiment on her, just like I was, making it not worth the risk.

She moaned again and her eyelids fluttered, indicating she was about to wake up.

Which she did, with a start.

Wide, golden-brown eyes regarded me more questioningly than fearfully, but fear was there nevertheless. She scrambled up on her elbows and regarded me with an open mouth, forming a perfect O.

“Are you alright?” I asked as gently as possible, thankful that my translator had finally picked up on her language.

Her eyes blinked as if she was trying to make me go away. She must have understood me though because she nodded, barely, but it was there.

“Who are you?” she asked in a melodious voice that seemed to caress my cock.

“I am Captain Galexor Ghar-Huhn,” I introduced myself.

“Galexor?” she repeated, trying to familiarize herself with my name.

“And you are?”

“Amber,” she swallowed, pulling up the blanket all the way to her chin. “Am I naked under here?”

“I’m afraid so. Your clothes were wet and cold. You were shivering, and I didn’t want you to get sick.”

“Who are you?” she asked again, and this time, I was sure she wasn’t asking my name.

“I can’t tell you that.” I shook my head. Any information I gave her would only endanger her.

“But you are not... from Earth?” She visibly swallowed.

I shook my head. Earth was the name the natives called D-1/4-5289d11.

“Alright then.” She tried a small smile, probably meant to reassure herself more than me. “Nice to meet you, and thank you for saving me.”

I chuckled at her attempt at bravery. I didn’t think she was exactly afraid of me, but my presence must have unnerved her.

“It was my pleasure.” I bowed slightly. “If you are alright now, I’ll be on my way and—”

“Where are you going?” she wanted to know, scooting forward a little.

“My orders are to explore your planet,” I explained, hoping my father wouldn’t see this as giving away too much.

“To do what? Annihilate us? Conquer us?”

“Hardly.” This time I chuckled. “Will you be okay alone?”

“I’ve been okay alone for a long time. I’ll manage.” She moved forward, carefully keeping the blanket around her.

Her small feet hit the ground, but when she tried to stand up, her legs gave out, and she collapsed back on the couch. “Looks like I’m going to be sleeping here for the night. Don’t worry about me. I’ll be okay.”

She seemed eager to get rid of me, but my conscience wouldn’t allow me to leave seeing her so weak.

“Can I get you anything?”

She pointed at the stove. “If you don’t mind, on the stove is a pot with... tea. It’ll help me warm up. You can have some too if you like.”

I walked over to an area that reminded me of the flagship’s galley I had visited once when I was dating... never mind that. This galley was decidedly smaller and more primitive, but I figured out what she meant by stove even though the entire contraption was crude and dangerous. But it admittedly added a certain charm to the room.

On a counter next to the stove, I found several cups and a ladle inside the pot to fill two mugs with the steaming, slightly orange liquid which gave off a pleasing smell even though I couldn’t place it.

When I returned to her, I held one cup out to her and took the other.

“Do you want to sit down?” She pointed at another couch and a smaller upholstered chair with patches sewn into several

places. I chose that, and sank into it right when she called out, “Careful, it—” And that’s when the chair attacked me.

Well, not really attacked, but it suddenly folded back and out, moving my legs up while my upper body was slammed backward. I managed to keep the cup in my hand and the spillage minimal, but in my awkward position, I was unable to pull my phasor, which was probably a good thing, because once I basically laid flat on the contraption, it stopped moving.

“What the—” My cursing was interrupted by bell-like laughter that created a vortex inside my stomach. Surprised, I looked up and watched her shoulders bob up and down. She held on to her cup with both hands, as if afraid she would spill it, which was a real possibility given how hard she shook with laughter.

“Oh my God, I’m so sorry, I shouldn’t be laughing,” she pushed out between giggles, “but you should have seen your face.”

A low rumble started inside my chest, and before I knew it, I joined her laughter as well.

After a moment, I managed to place the cup on a small side table and clumsily climbed out of the chair. “If you don’t mind, I think I’d rather sit over here.”

She giggled some more, and I exaggerated my difficulties getting out of the chair just to hear more of it.

When I finally sat on the other smaller couch and looked over at her, all laughter died between us. Before our eyes

locked, I noticed tiny dimples on both sides of her lips, lips that were thankfully turning rosier. Her golden eyes captured me even more though as something sparked between us, making my breath hitch.

Her eyes were filled with a depth of emotion I had never seen before. I read sadness in them, but also lingering amusement from my battle with the chair. She looked at me with a thousand unasked questions burning in them, and suddenly I wanted to stay and answer every single one of them. Nothing had ever captivated me as much as this tiny human female.



A MILLION QUESTIONS RACED through my mind, which was still a bit foggy from falling into the lake, fainting, and yes, let's be honest, the alien across from me.

An alien!

How freaking freaky was that?

I wasn't sure if I was more terrified or curious about him, but whichever it was, it was hard to deny a certain pull toward him. He was an incredibly attractive man once I saw past his metallic blue shimmering skin. I wasn't great at estimating heights, but he easily reached six and half feet, dwarfing the family room and kitchen area in my small cabin.

He was broad chested in a way I had only ever seen in movies and on body builders, never in real life, and the same went for his enormous biceps stretching the strange, skintight material of his clothes. A long torso narrowed into slim hips, sitting atop even longer legs. Long and muscly, with something hard and bulging in the center that made me

swallow and wonder what *it* would look like. Which made me question my handle on reality again, because I had never before allowed my eyes to stray to a man's bulge, leaving me wondering how he was stacked, nor had I ever wanted to before.

My sex life hadn't been exactly active, but I had managed my fair share of encounters. Still, a man's cock had never been something I contemplated like this before.

Yet it was there, especially when he moved to hold out a cup to me. I mean it was right there, right in front of my face, so to speak, and heat rose through my frozen body.

Besides my inappropriate thoughts, my mind was busy trying to work through my near-death experience and being rescued by an alien. An alien!

I should have been terrified of him, should have wondered if he came alone or if his brethren lurked nearby, ready to extinguish life on Earth—yes, I watched way too many sci-fi movies. Instead, I found myself mostly curious and told myself it was probably because I wasn't able to fully think straight yet.

It was hard to imagine him and whoever was with him having come to kill all humans after he saved my clumsy ass from the lake though. He wouldn't have done that if his intentions were to kill us all, would he? Or had they come to... probe us?

For some reason, the thought of that made me giggle again, because let's face it, I wouldn't have minded him probing me,

not in the least. Actually, him probing me sent all kinds of heat through me, and before I knew it, sweat dribbled down my body. My very naked body. A body he had undressed.

When I looked up, our eyes met and locked. The strange red glow from beneath his deep-set eyes should have scared me even more than the knowledge that he was an alien, but for some reason, I found it fascinating.

At first, I thought they were just red, glowing orbs, but now I could see that it was his sclera that was red instead of white, while his pupils and irises were black as night. It wasn't a sinister red glow either, it was warm and... interesting.

I sipped my tea and rejoiced in the warmth that spread through my blood vessels as the liquid hit my stomach. I probably overdid it a tad bit with the Captain Morgan, but dang, it did its job.

“This is good,” the alien... I should probably start using the name he gave me, Galexor said.

“It's mine and my grampa's recipe,” I explained proudly. “We kept adding and subtracting ingredients to it over the years and this is what we came up with. We call it *the concoction*.”

After a second, because my curiosity about him nearly killed me, I asked, “Do you have something like this... in space or wherever you came from?”

“Nothing that tastes this good.” He smiled, and my stomach fluttered. Hell, he was handsome when he did that. Dimples

appeared in his slightly prominent cheeks, making him appear mischievous.

I noticed more sweat dripping down my back, was it that hot in here? I looked at the fireplace, but it wasn't burning full blast any longer. Why was I so hot?

“Are you alright?” Galexor asked, “You look hot.”

For a moment, I allowed myself the illusion that he called *me* hot instead of inquiring about the state of my body, and I liked it. I wanted to look hot for him. Another inappropriate giggle escaped me, but thankfully, I turned that childish behavior down. “I'm feeling hot. Is it hot in here?”

“I wouldn't know. Unless the temperature change is significant, we don't experience hot or cold,” he explained almost apologetically.

He moved his hand in a wave-like gesture, and a screen appeared out of thin air between him and me with glowing, indecipherable symbols on it.

“Wow!” I exclaimed fascinated.

“The temperature doesn't seem to have changed much since we entered,” he explained and moved his finger up and down the screen, and I realized that he was looking at some kind of computer or tablet and couldn't help but be impressed. The fingers of the programmer inside me itched to get my hands on this screen and test it out.

He wrinkled his brow. “Yours has though. It's slightly higher than it was before.”

Automatically, my hand moved up to my forehead and found it burning hot. My little dip in the lake seemed to have made me feverish. As if on cue, I sneezed a few times.

“Are you okay?” Galexor asked again, shrinking back in his chair as if nobody had ever sneezed around him before or as if he was the world’s biggest germaphobe.

My ears rang from sneezing. “I should probably take an aspirin, just in case.” Again I tried to get up but fell back on my ass.

“I’ll get it. Where is it and what does it look like?” he offered.

“In the medicine cabinet, in the bathroom.” With a start, I realized he probably had no idea what I was talking about and added, “You can open the mirror on the wall, they’re inside there. A clear bottle with white pills. It says aspirin right on it.”

I wanted to smack my head, because he probably couldn’t read our language either, which reminded me. “How come we can talk like this? When you first spoke, it was all gibberish.”

He tapped the side of his head. “A cerebral implant. It allows me to communicate in any chosen language, and also to read and write it.”

“Whoa, that’s awesome,” I gushed, because a friend of mine had tried to develop something similar and failed badly. Not a *cerebral implant*, or anything like that, just a simple app that

would have allowed the users to do what Galexor had described.

Galexor moved into the bathroom as if he knew my place inside and out already, which was when I noticed the towel around my hair that he must have gotten from the bathroom and placed around my head while I was out.

Gratefulness toward the big alien rushed up inside me. I couldn't remember the last time anyone had done something thoughtful like this for me. It had been months, ever since Grampa died. *No*, I chided myself as tears welled, I would not think about him right now.

I listened to the telltale signs of Galexor opening and closing the cabinets, and seconds later, he returned shaking the aspirin bottle. "How do they come out?"

I stretched out my hand, and he handed the bottle over so I could show him how to open it. For good measure, I took two, flushing them down with the now-cooled concoction.

"You live here alone?" He observed more than asked.

"Yeah, it used to be me and my grampa, but he died... a few months ago."

"I'm sorry," he offered, and I gave him a wry smile, unsure of how to reply, just like I had been with the hundreds of other *I'm sorries* I had been given over the past few months.

"It's hard," I heard myself say, acknowledging the truth of it to somebody else for the first time since Grampa left me.

When Galexor didn't respond, I added, "It was just him and me for so long that I don't know how to... move on."

"What about your parents?" He settled back down on the other couch after giving the recliner a glare.

"My parents died in a car crash when I was little. It's only been Grampa and me for as long as I can remember."

We fell silent for a moment before he said, "You live far from the other indig—humans. I didn't know anybody was out here. I thought this area was uninhabited."

"It's just me for miles. I turned off the lights to see the stars better," I explained, and for some reason, utterly unworried about admitting this to a strange man. If he had nefarious intentions, he would have let me drown.

"Doesn't that get lonely?"

"Sometimes," I admitted. "It was harder when I was a teenager and wanted to be with my friends, but the older I got, the more I liked it. Grampa did put in state-of-the-art satellite dishes so we have the best internet available."

"Internet?"

"Wi-Fi."

And when he still looked as if he didn't understand, I explained, "It's what makes our computers and phones work with others far away. It's how we communicate with another person who lives further away."

“Oh, okay,” he nodded, but I wasn’t sure if he understood. It had been my lifeline as a teenager though. And it had been my grampa’s love for communication that got me into programming and app development.

“So what exactly are you scouting? Us humans or...” I drifted off because his face closed up, and I realized he wasn’t about to tell me.

“Your tablet looks dope.” I pointed at the air where his screen had been up a little while ago.

“Dope?” He arched an eyebrow. “Isn’t that like a drug?”

So his translator device wasn’t all *that* good. I snickered.

“It’s just an expression. It means awesome, great, exciting,” I clarified.

“Oh,” he chuckled and shrugged his impressive shoulders. “I guess for a Class-D planet it would—” he broke off, looking guiltily at me.

I laughed. “Don’t worry, this,” I indicated my cabin, “must look provincial to you.”

“It’s cozy,” he said, and his expression changed to something almost wistful.

I fought another sneeze coming on and lost. This time, unladylike snot ran down my face and embarrassed heat rushed through me. I leaned over the couch to pull a few tissues out of the handy dispenser there and blew my nose in an even more unladylike fashion.

Fascinated, he stared at me.

“Your people don’t sneeze?” I questioned a bit defensively.

“We don’t get sick. Are you getting sick?”

I coughed. “I might be. Swimming in the lake in the middle of winter will do that to a human.”

Once again, I remembered that I was naked under the blanket. “I should probably put some clothes on.”

“And I should probably leave,” he offered, rising.

Regret rushed through me. I didn’t want him to leave. “Where will you go in the middle of the night?”

“It’s excellent cover for my... scouting,” he grinned.

This time, I managed to finally get off the couch and stand on my feet. “Please eat something, it’s the least I can do after you saved my life and all. Plus,” I gave him a what I hoped was an enticing smile, “it would be rude of me to not offer you some hospitality after you came such a... long way.” Then I remembered something. “That is, if you can you eat our food?”

“Only one way to find out,” he said, and his mischievous dimples flashed again, weakening my knees for other reasons than tiredness. “But you probably shouldn’t be cooking. You are... sick.”

“Just give me a moment. I’m alright.” I held the blanket tight around my chest and indicated the short hallway. “I’ll be right back.”

“I’ll be right here,” he responded in his deep voice, making my stomach flutter some more.

No member of the opposite sex had ever made my stomach flutter before. Oh, I had been nervous when Tom came to pick me up for prom night or when he kissed me later that evening, or in college when Josh had invited me to his apartment, but not like this. Not with this tingling sensation in my stomach that warmed me from the inside out and made me yearn for more time with this alien.

I didn’t even try to tell myself that it was normal curiosity about a species from outer space. I mean, how freaking awesome was that? But the truth was that there was more to it than that. I felt attracted to him.

I hurried to get into a pair of black tights and an oversized sweatshirt before I blow-dried my hair. While looking into the mirror, I realized I looked a fright, while the hottest guy in the world—no, universe—was camped out in my cabin. Seeing my flushed face though, there was no denying that I was running a slight fever, one that no amount of makeup would be able to cover.

What was I thinking anyway?

He was a freaking alien.

An alien who came to do God knows what to our world, and I was thinking about flirting with him?

After I just had a near-death experience?

With a sigh and a scold toward my vainer self, I returned to the family room/kitchen and found him staring at our picture wall.

Since it had always been just Grampa and me, we might have overdone our picture wall slightly. At least fifty photos of us were plastered in sometimes tacky frames all over the wall.

Grampa and I by the Grand Canyon when I was seven, several Christmas shots of us, me, photos from my graduation days—kindergarten, eighth grade, high school, and several from college. Grampa had been so proud of me that day.

And in the center of it all were my parents, holding a baby, me, and smiling joyfully into the camera. Full of hopes and dreams of having a big family, which all came crashing down one night when they celebrated their tenth wedding anniversary and a drunk driver hit them.

“I like this,” Galexor said when he noticed me watching him. “It’s like snapshots of your life.”

“Yeah.” I joined him and stared at the pictures that had become so much a part of my surroundings that I had barely looked at them in years. They were like the old cabinet holding Grandma’s valuable china or an unused footstool. There, but barely ever acknowledged.

“What is this?” he asked, pointing at a shot of Grampa and me proudly holding up an array of trout hung from a string, smiling brightly at the camera.

“That was a good fishing day,” I said with nostalgia rising inside me. Grampa had loved to go fishing, but something about the slimy creatures and their death fights had turned me off from it, and I had seldom joined him on his fishing trips.

“Fishing?”

“Fish live in the water; some people catch and eat them,” I explained badly.

“This tree?” he pointed at a picture of Grampa and me standing in front of a decorated Christmas tree, similar to the one I put up yesterday but hadn’t managed to fully decorate yet.

“Is that the same?” Galexor nodded at the still half-decorated fir.

“No, we used to cut one down every year. Once they’re cut down, they die after a few weeks, but they make the air smell incredibly nice when you burn them,” I told him.

He wrinkled his forehead. “I don’t see the sense in that.”

“It’s a Christmas tree,” I tried to explain. “It’s a holiday many people on Earth observe every year. It’s to honor the birth of our God’s son.”

“Oh,” that seemed to make sense to him. “And these boxes?” He tapped his finger against the many wrapped presents underneath the tree in the picture. Most of them had been for me. Grampa had always overdone it on Christmas and my birthdays, buying me presents from him and even more from

my parents, because he said he knew how much they would have wanted to spoil me.

“They’re wrapped presents we open on Christmas Day; well, most people do. Some open them the night before.”

“And this guy? That’s not your grampa?” His finger circled a picture of five-year-old me sitting on Santa’s lap.

“No, that’s Santa Claus.”

“Santa Claus?”

I snickered. “It’s a tale we tell children. Santa Claus comes every year for Christmas and leaves presents under the tree for them.”

“Why?”

I wasn’t sure if he was asking why Santa would do that or why we told this story to our children. “It’s based on an old legend, and it makes the kids happy.”

“Oh,” he said, and stared at the red-clothed man, deep in thought. “That’s kind of nice.”

“You don’t do that for your children? Or something similar?”

“We don’t have Christmas.”

“Do you have any other holidays? Birthdays?”

“We have a naming day. Friends and family give presents when a baby is named, and then the parents celebrate all the important naming day anniversaries.”

“Which are?” I asked, intrigued by this.

“The fifth anniversary celebrates the child’s field of learning.”

I interrupted him. “Field of learning?”

“It’s when the child’s interests are determined, which decides which schooling they will receive.”

“So you decide what you want to be for the rest of your life at five?” I asked in disbelief.

“Don’t you?”

I shook my head. “Most youths don’t even know what they want to do when they get into college, at around eighteen.”

“They might have forgotten because you waited too long,” he said.

“What do you mean?” I was getting curiouser. How could a child, at five, possibly know what they wanted to be?

“Children are closely observed,” Galexor explained. “Whatever they like to play with indicates what they’re interested in.”

“So if a four-year-old likes to play doctor, you send them to medical school?”

He nodded as if this were the simplest thing.

“Wow,” I exhaled, “I’ll have to give that some thought.”

“You didn’t know what career you wanted to pick at five?”

I chuckled. “I played with Barbies, and I’m sure glad they didn’t decide for me to become a model.”

He looked lost, but my stomach growled. It was time to eat something, especially if I wanted to kick this growing cold in the butt before it became a full-blown flu or worse.

“Come, let’s eat.”



“I DON’T WANT TO put you out. You need rest,” I protested when I followed her into the kitchen area.

“You’re not. I already prepared everything this morning,” she said, opening the door to a very old-fashioned oven. Steam entered the kitchen as well as an aroma that made my mouth water.

Using two small towels, she pulled out a steaming dish and placed it on top of the counter. I dubiously stared at the whitish foam-like stuff on top that looked brown in places.

“Tada,” she smiled warmly at me, a smile that did things to my cock and warmed my heart.

“That looks...” At a loss for words, I settled on a big lie, “Delicious.”

She laughed that bell-like laugh of hers again. “It might not look that good, but it’s yummy, and it’ll warm your belly.”

She pulled two very fragile-looking plates from a cupboard and forks from a drawer. With interest, I noticed that her forks

had more tines than ours but were otherwise the same.

With a large wooden spoon, she put a decent-sized helping of the white fluffy looking stuff on my plate, and I was surprised to see that underneath the fluff was another brownish mass.

“Are you sure you can eat this?”

I pulled my data processor up and used one of the attachments to stick it into the food she put on my plate. Within the blink of an eye, my screen filled with what I had already assumed: the food was palatable with Scekyns’ digestive system. For a moment, I considered telling her it wasn’t when I gave the runny mess on my plate another look, but a glance at her eager face didn’t allow me to do so. It would have been the coward’s way out.

I put on a brave face and plunged my fork into the whitish fluff, all the while pep talking myself. After all, I was a test pilot, adventure ran in my blood. I had just never tried my daring nature on alien food.

“Be careful, it’s hot,” she advised and watched my fork with bated breath as it moved to my mouth.

I sent a silent prayer to the gods to not hurt her feelings and steeled my facial muscles to keep a smile plastered to my lips.

Thankfully, it turned out that all my worries had been for nothing, because the white fluff was delicious, and I took a bigger bite.

“Good?” she asked.

I nodded. “Really good.”

Next, I tried the brownish mass and found myself more than pleasantly surprised again. The texture was chewy, but it was the burst of flavors that exploded in my mouth that I really enjoyed.

“I know it looks funny, but shepherd’s pie was one of mine and my grampa’s favorite dishes.”

“I can see why,” I said, meaning it.

Before I stuck my fork back into the food, she indicated the two stools in front of the counter. “Let’s sit.”

The chair felt flimsy and too little for my butt, but I made do after seeing how happy it seemed to make her to be sitting here with me, and I wondered how lonely she must have been in the past months, maybe even before.

I finished a second plate before I rejected a third. My stomach was full and even though the data processor said the food was compatible didn’t mean I might not regret eating this much in other ways. The food was richer than the fare we received in the mess hall, which were measured for maximum nutrition rather than taste.

“You can stay the night,” she offered with a shy twitch of her lips. “It’s dark outside. I know you said it would be easier for you, but there are bears and mountain lions out there.”

I assumed bears and mountain lions to be predators, and her concern touched me.

“You can sleep on the couch if you like,” she added.

What I should have done is return to my ship and spend the night there, but I justified wanting to stay in her cozy cabin with her by reminding myself that somebody could more easily spot me coming out of the lake in the daylight. Plus, I needed time to prepare my transformation processor for the right kind of optical illusion that would allow me to move freely among the humans.

“I would like that,” I agreed.

“Good.” She excitedly clapped her hands together. “I haven’t had a guest here in a very long time. I’ll fix you a wonderful, typical human breakfast in the morning.”

How could I have rejected that offer?

“Come, I want to show you something else,” she said, enthusiastically moving to a door that I assumed led to the outside on the other side of the house from where we had entered.

She grabbed two coats from a rack and handed me one. “It was my grampa’s and will probably be too small, but it’ll keep out some of the cold.”

I didn’t have the heart to remind her that Scekyns didn’t experience temperatures like her species and draped the coat over my shoulders. Just like she had predicted, it was way too small.

She, on the other hand, looked adorable in her oversized mantle. She wound a long, warm piece of cloth around my

neck before doing the same to herself, and together we walked outside.

A white layer she called snow covered most of the front yard, laying over leafless bushes and trees and twinkling prettily under the bright moon. On one side, I saw large mountains looming and hundreds of trees. Some resembled the one she had in her living room—who had ever heard of bringing a tree inside?

I admitted, though, that her world was beautiful.

She led me further away from the house before she turned us both around. “Wait here, I’ll be right back.”

With that, she walked back to the house, leaving me to admire her backside. Her hair swayed gently in the soft breeze and looked so silky, my hands itched to touch it.

She picked something up by the door and turned to face me. “Ready?”

I had no idea for what, but the bright smile on her face was contagious, so I grinned back. “Ready.”

She connected something and suddenly the entire house and yard were bathed in twinkling lights. They hung from the rafters of the porch, moved around the door and windows, were entwined over the banister surrounding the porch and even lit up bushes and a couple of tall trees.

Most of the lights sparkled in a whitish hue, but some, mostly in the bushes, shone red or green. A soft humming

caused me to turn my head, and, amazed, I watched a strange contraption filling and coming to life.

I counted nine alien animals with long horns on the top of their heads, four legs and the largest black eyes I had ever seen, attached to what had to be some kind of vehicle, in which sat a chubby man with a long white beard and long white hair, holding the reins and a long something that appeared to be an old-fashioned written list. Behind him were boxes similar to the ones I noticed under the tree in Amber's picture, stacked so high they looked in danger of falling off.

As soon as the entire contraption was fully blown up, soft music began to play.

“Do you like it?”

I hadn't noticed that she had stepped next to me; I had been too engrossed in what was happening in her yard, but I slowly nodded. “It's beautiful.”

“That's Santa.” She pointed at the jolly-looking fellow sitting on the vehicle, looking as if he was having a hell of a time.

It was easy to picture him delivering presents to younglings; he looked the part. One question, however, stuck in my mind. “You said he enters the houses through the chimney?”

She elbowed me in the side, and for some reason, I really liked that intimate gesture, as if we were old friends. “It's just a fairy tale. Just let your imagination loose and go with it.”

I could do that. Especially for her.

I placed my arm around her shoulders because it felt right doing so, and we stood there for a little while, taking her decorations in, until she let out a slight cough, and I decided it was time to go back inside where she would be warm.



IT WAS STRANGE THINKING that a man was lying on the couch in my living room right now and an alien at that, but for some reason it felt right. As if he belonged there.

I fell asleep soon after I snuggled into my pillow, surprising me. Ever since my grampa's death, I had been having a hell of a time falling asleep, often laying there for hours, worrying about the future.

My grampa's death had been sudden and surprising. He had been fixing me breakfast one moment, and the next, he was gone. Not so surprising had been his will where he declared me his sole heir. But then I found out that he had mortgaged his previously paid for house to cover my student loans, and devastation hit me hard.

He told me he was paying for my college from a fund my parents had established for me before their deaths. I should have known better. My parents were young when I was born and when they died, they were just a couple of years older than me now. They wouldn't have had the time to establish a

college fund for me. A drunk driver had robbed them of that and so many other opportunities.

It was typical of my grampa though to do something like that to, one, keep my parent's memories alive for me, and two, to take on such a burden without telling me.

I thought of all the times I bought a brand-new lesson book instead of a used one and shame racked me, making me sick to my stomach as I wondered if the mounting bills I accumulated with that kind of reckless spending had caused my grampa's heart to fail. If only I had known.

I didn't know how he managed to pay the mortgage with his social security income, but somehow, he did until he died and left me with the debt.

The debt and no job, because the one I had been promised after my graduation dissolved into thin air when the company flopped belly up, followed by a few others, flooding the field I had dreamed of working in with programmers who had a lot more experience than me.

The little money Grampa left me was gone within three months of paying the bills. I found a couple of freelance jobs that made me some money to keep this place afloat until last month, when I received a letter from the bank threatening to take my cottage from me if I didn't pay.

So here I was, with no job and soon with no place to live. I had already sold everything that was sellable, starting with my car, because it brought more than selling Grampa's old beat-up truck—which would have been out of the question for

sentimental reasons anyway. Followed by a few knickknacks in the house, Grampa's tools—which nearly broke my heart—and anything I could think of that would make some money. I stopped at the few pieces of jewelry from my mom and Grandma, knowing full well that selling them would only stall the inevitable and leave me bereft of the memories that came with them.

As much as I searched the job market, even looking in other states, there was nothing, and when I did see something, the companies were looking for programmers with more experience than I had.

I advertised in the local newspaper to help anybody with their computers if they needed it, but the fifty or hundred dollars I scraped together that way mostly went to groceries and gas, not to mention the utility bills that still had to be paid.

We had water from a well, but I still needed electricity, the internet, and my phone.

So I had resigned myself to the inevitable. I would pack everything up after this Christmas and vacate the premises per the bank's instructions, abandoning the place that had been in my family for generations. Which was exactly the reason why I had such a hard time sleeping at night, because all this was my fault.

Grampa's house had been paid for until I decided I needed a college education. I could have worked in our small town, where I would have made enough money to pay the monthly bills and bring food home, but no, I had to get my head set on

becoming an app developer and making more money than I could have ever spent.

My fault.

I lost everything and only had myself to blame for it. Worse yet, I couldn't stop the biting suspicion that I was the reason for hastening my grampa's sudden death.

So, when I finally did fall asleep at night, nightmares plagued and awakened me nearly every hour, bathed in sweat and sometimes crying, hugging my pillow tighter.

It was still dark when I finally decided to get up, since sleep was more torture than restful.

I took a long hot shower, blow-dried my hair, and put on warm, comfy clothes, and applied a light makeup, fully set to start on the Christmas baking today.

Our neighbors were few and far in between, but it was an annual custom to create Christmas cookie baskets and take them from house to house. It was something my grandma and her friends started decades ago, and it was still going to this day.

I pushed back the tears that wanted to form at the thought that this would be my last year doing this for them and swore that wherever I ended up, I would honor this tradition by taking baked goods to my new neighbors.

First though, I needed a cup of coffee.

Feet pushed into my bunny slippers, I shuffled into the kitchen and turned on the light and screamed when a startled

cry reached my ears. I jumped back, hitting the old fridge and pushing it into the wall. Banging my hip, I stared wide eyed at the blue alien sprawled out on my couch.

My heart hammered so wildly; I thought it would jump out of my chest. How in the name of all that was holy, had I forgotten about Galexor? I blamed it on my addled mind, sleep deprivation, and the slight fever I felt running through me.

“Amber?”

“Good morning, Galexor. I’m so sorry. I forgot you were sleeping here.” My hand searched for the light switch to turn the bright lights off, instantly cloaking the room in darkness once again, since the sun hadn’t risen yet.

“It’s alright, you can leave the lights on. I’m awake.” *Now* was the unspoken last word in that sentence and it made me giggle.

“When is the sun coming up on this planet?” he asked as he stretched, and my eyes about bulged out of my head as my finger flipped the switch once again.

The blanket had slipped off his *naked* upper body, exposing a ripped chest and abdominal muscles that looked so hard I bet I could have bounced a quarter off them.

Not that his shirt from last night had covered much, but this? Sweat accumulated on my back, and I didn’t think it was from my slightly elevated temperature. I gulped and forced my mouth to shut closed. Nobody had any business looking like that. It should be illegal. Yes, he was alien with his deep blue

skin, but otherwise? The only men I had ever seen coming close to looking like this had been on TV.

His biceps flexed, and I didn't think I would have been able to encircle his upper arm with both of my hands.

A flutter spread through my stomach. It had been a long time since I had been alone with a man or had sex with one. Toys only got a girl so far...

“Amber?”

Oh, right, he had asked me a question, but for the life of me I couldn't remember what he had asked as he twisted his torso to the right to work out a kink I assumed. *Or to show off*, my mind suggested, but the reason didn't matter to me when all I saw were those rock-hard abs moving underneath his skin so deliciously.

Before I could make a complete ass of myself, I remembered his question, sun, right. “Ahm, in about an hour or so.” I forcibly moved to the kitchen sink and the coffeemaker to the right of it. “Do you want some coffee? Pancakes?”

I heard the smile in his voice and feet hitting the wooden floor. “I don't know what either of those things are, but yes, sure.”

My hand shook when I popped the first capsule into the coffeemaker and felt his breath close by. For somebody this big, he moved very quietly. *Like a predator*, I thought, and swallowed as other images of him popped into my head. Like

him stalking me through the house, into my bedroom where he would peel off my clothes and... *stop it, Amber, stop it.*

My hand reached for the door to the cupboard, but he beat me to it as he stood mere inches from me, opening it for me. I prayed I wouldn't drop the mug when I grabbed one by its handle and put it underneath the coffeemaker before I pushed the on button.

"What else can I do?" he asked, crossing his arms over his *naked* chest, making his biceps bulge again.

"Uh, I can take it from here if you want to... take a shower?"

"Shower?"

I rubbed the back of my neck to keep my trembling hand from his sight as the first drops of heavenly smelling coffee filled the room.

"A shower, where you can clean up," I added.

"Interesting, show me?" he requested.

I took him to the bathroom he had visited last night and showed him the shower/tub combination and how it worked. His face lit up.

"Water comes straight from above you?"

I smiled automatically. His excitement was contagious, and I would have loved to see his face when he tried the shower for the first time. And not because I wanted to ogle him some more—I did—but because his handsome face suddenly took

on a more boyish note; so endearing, he could have asked anything of me at that moment.

By now, my fingers trembled ferociously as they reached for the lever to first turn on the water and then to pull the little stopper up in the spout to have the water come out of the shower.

He chuckled with delight and held out his hand. “This is amazing!”

You are amazing, lay at the tip of my tongue as I stared at his handsome face filled with pleasure.

“Careful, it’ll get ho—” I interrupted myself as I remembered him telling me yesterday that he was relatively immune to hot and cold.

“Alright, hold on,” I bent down to open the cabinet and found a shower gel that smelled more manly. I bought it a long time ago and couldn’t even remember why. Grampa hadn’t liked it, so it had been sitting here, collecting dust.

“Here is some shower gel.” I held it out to him.

He took the bottle, opened the top and smelled it. If possible, his face lit up even more. “It smells like your forest out there.”

I nodded and remembered suddenly that that was the exact reason why I bought it in the first place.

“Towels are here.” I showed him a built-in closet that was stacked with toilet paper, towels, cleaners, and whatnots. “Enjoy, and I’ll fix breakfast in the meantime.”

He stopped me by the door; his fingers were incredibly soft on my arm and sent goosebumps down my flesh. “I feel bad not helping you.”

“Don’t,” I waved him off. “It’s my pleasure, after all, you saved my life.”

Right on cue, I let out a loud sneeze and his sweet expression turned to worry. “I’m fine,” I assured him and scooted out the door before he stopped me, closing it behind me.

On the other side, I leaned against it for a moment, gently stroking the part of my arm his fingers had touched. If I hadn’t known better, I would have sworn I was falling for the guy. I snickered, right. Like I didn’t have any other worries than to be falling for a handsome alien who saved my life and was taking a shower in my bathroom.

A shower, oh God, I groaned as images of his godlike, very naked body, in my bathtub began to torture me, making my stomach flip for the second time in not even an hour.

You need to get a grip, I admonished myself and rigorously pushed thoughts of my loofah rubbing over his gorgeous body out of my mind and myself off the wall to make my way into the kitchen, where I energetically pulled out everything I needed to make breakfast.

One cup of coffee was done, ready for me to mix it to my specification of heavenly which included a generous dollop of sweet cream and several spoonfuls of sugar that would go straight to my waistline, but I didn’t care. I had sworn I wouldn’t care about the twenty or so extra pounds I was

carrying—alright, twenty-five—until this was all over, and I left Grampa's place for good. I couldn't deal with calorie counting right now, I just couldn't.

I decided I would wait on fixing Galexor's coffee until he was out of the shower and began to whip up the pancake batter from scratch just like Grampa taught me. I added a few teaspoons of baking powder, cinnamon, and pinch of nutmeg—Grandma's secret recipe—to the four eggs and vigorously whipped them into a fluffy consistency before I added sugar, flour, and milk.

I began browning bacon on the griddle before I poured the first of the batter into a cast iron skillet where butter was already melting.

All the while, I tried to studiously avoid listening to the running water and imagining my loofah moving up and down a rock-hard chest, abs, legs, and other places on a long, thick body.

The first pancake was ready, and I placed it on Grandma's good china before I added more butter and batter and turned the bacon.

The kitchen was beginning to fill with the aroma of my childhood, and for just a moment, I allowed myself to dwell in nostalgia. At least that distracted me from the gorgeous male on the other side of the wall.



THE HUMAN SHOWER WAS absolute bliss. Our cleansing booths didn't even come close to making one feel this refreshed and clean. Granted, I didn't like the wetness of my body afterward, but two of Amber's towels took quick care of that, and the hair blower she showed me before she stepped out took care of the rest, despite my hair looking as if I had stepped into a vortex.

When I walked out of the bathroom, I was temporarily frozen at the sight greeting me. Soft music, reminiscent of the one she had played last night after the lights turned on, played in the background, and Amber swayed slightly to the beat of it.

Her brown hair was piled in the back of her head, but some shorter strands had come loose and hung adorably into her face. Now and then, she swiped her head or blew against them to get them out of her eyes, looking so endearing it warmed my heart.

She wore a piece of clothing on top of her clothes that was spattered with a white powdery substance. In her hands she

held a long wooden utensil of sorts that she used to flip something over inside another flat contraption that sat on what she had called a stove, and from which flames licked against the flat contraption. What was it with humans and fire?

Didn't they know how destructive it could be? Especially when I looked at all the flimsy furniture, wall hangings, and knickknacks, not to mention the tree she brought into the house.

Still, all this tugged at my heart, made me feel more comfortable than I had been in years. And then there was the strong attraction between us. I barely suppressed a sudden urge to storm over to where she stood and pull her into my arms to kiss her senseless. Never had I seen a more attractive female than her, and I had seen plenty.

My brother and I were considered sought-after bachelors. Not on our own merit, well, Adred maybe, because he was a commander in his own right, but because we were the High Commander's sons. It bothered Adred that we were both considered high catches despite my lower rank, a fact that amused me to no end.

Anyway. Because of that, we were invited to every social gathering in the Galactic Union and mercilessly stalked by females on our personal profile accounts. I had seen various beauties of all species in varied amounts of clothing or lack thereof, but none compared to the beauty standing by an ancient-looking stove making breakfast for me.

“Smells delicious,” I said when I realized that Amber remained oblivious to my entrance.

Startled, she looked up. The smile on her face at seeing me teetered; however, her lips quivered before she bit into them to keep from laughing. She lost her battle though and was soon bent over, while loud giggles escaped her.

I would be lying if I said my pride didn't take a beating at her laughing at me, but the sound of it made my soul sing, and I would have done anything for her, including hanging upside down naked from her rafters, if it meant she would have kept on laughing.

“Galexor,” she tried catching her breath. She looked up at me, and her eyes sparkled with warm humor. Not once did I feel like she was belittling me or making fun of me.

“I'm sorry,” she hiccuped. “I'm so sorry, but...” here she giggled again, “what happened to...” She snorted, and I couldn't help myself but broke out in loud laughter myself even though I had no idea what we were laughing about; it was just contagious. “Your hair?”

My hair?

I noticed earlier that it did look as if I had been swept up by a vortex, standing up in places and looking windswept in others, but I hadn't seen it as a source of amusement.

She put the spatula down and came over to me, then she stretched on her tiptoes and mussed with her hands in my hair.

“I’m sorry. I guess I should have explained the blow dryer better. Hold on.”

She rushed into the bathroom and was wiping her palms together rigorously when she came back out.

“Here, bend your head.”

Whatever was in her hands, she smeared it into my hair and moved her fingers this way and that, and I barely suppressed a moan of deep pleasure from it. Nobody had ever touched the top of my head like this. I hadn’t even known that was a turn-on.

“That’s better.”

Before I could look in the mirror, a pungent smell hit me. “What is that sme—”

My words were overshadowed by the loudest, most obnoxious sound I had ever heard. It was so shrill it threatened to burst my eardrums.

“Oh no!” Amber exclaimed.

She rushed to the stove, where dark, black smoke rose to the ceiling. First, she fumbled with some knobs to turn the flames off, then she began to wave a smaller towel against a round disk on the ceiling.

Figuring that the noise was coming from it, I rushed to her side and pried the thing off the wall. Instant silence followed.

“Oh, my, thank you.” She looked sheepishly at me.

“What is that?”

“A fire alarm. The stove sets it off sometimes when I—”

“Burn something?” I asked, raising my eyebrows, but glad to know the humans were taking some precautions for all the fire hazards they kept in their homes.

She bit her lower lip, and her cheeks blushed endearingly. “Yep.”

I held the disk up and scrutinized it. It didn’t look very sophisticated, but I supposed it got the job done.

“Alright, let me see. Thank God it was only the pancake and not the bacon. That’s still edible. Luckily, I already have a bunch of pancakes done. Hmm.” Just when I thought she couldn’t possibly become any cuter, she proved me wrong; her rambling was delightful.

“Can I do anything?” I offered, still holding the little plastic disk in my hand.

“Oh no, everything is fine, come, sit.” She pointed at the table I noticed last night. “How do you like your coffee... oh silly question...” She giggled again. “You probably never had coffee.”

“Can’t say I have.” I stepped into her space where she stood by the sink and deeply inhaled the sweet aromas coming off her. Even though I couldn’t name a single one, each one reminded me of comfort and happiness, making her nearly irresistible.

One of her brown strands had come loose, and I gave in to the temptation to tuck it behind her ear. Surprised, she looked

up, and when our eyes met, I couldn't stop myself. "I need to kiss you."

She gave me an imperceptible nod, and I placed the stupid plastic disk on the counter before I wound my hand around her waist to pull her closer to me. Large eyes regarded me, and I thought I read as much desire for me in them as I felt for her.

She tilted her head, opening her mouth slightly, and that was all the invitation I needed to claim her.

Her lips were as soft as they looked, and when my tongue received its first taste of her, I nearly lost it. Nothing but sweetness with a slight tang of something bitter that was intoxicating.

I wrapped my tongue around hers and groaned.

Her arms flung around my neck, and she pressed herself as much against me as possible, pushing her breasts against my torso and creating all kinds of havoc inside me. Their pressure against me was the sweetest torture a male could possibly imagine.

If I thought stealing a kiss from her would help with the sexual tension between us, I was wrong. I wanted her now more than before, as my rock-hard cock attested to.

I allowed my palm to move up and down the gentle curve of her spine and relished how her hand played with my hair again.

My free hand moved up to grab a handful of her silken hair and found it just as soft as I had imagined.

A deep groan rising inside me told me that I needed to pull back, otherwise I would ravish her where we stood, right here, in the kitchen, which I might do later anyway, but I wanted our first time together to be in a proper bed. I wanted to see her naked form spread out on a soft mattress in front of me and relish every part of her.

I reluctantly broke our kiss and leaned my forehead against hers. Both of our breathing had increased, and against my chest, I felt the hard thumping of her heart matching the rhythm of mine.

Neither of us spoke for long moments, allowing our bodies to regain control and unwilling to break the spell that enveloped us from the moment our lips met.

“Best kiss ever,” she finally said.

I nodded against her. “I want more of you,” I confessed.



MY HEART SKIPPED A beat. *I want more of you.* Such simple words, and yet they meant everything to me. I didn't have much experience with kissing, or anything that came after. Living out here, secluded and far from the town, had ensured that, and later, at college, I had been too busy studying and wanting to make my grampa proud to get involved with boys much.

I had always told myself *later, later I will have time for that,* and look, now it seemed I had all the time in the world with this alien, or at least until he hopped back onto his spaceship and flew off into the sunset—or the bank foreclosed on my house.

Those thoughts should have sobered me, but they didn't. I had already talked myself into the illusion that I wouldn't think about any consequences until it was time to pack up. I had promised myself these two weeks before I would allow reality to kick back in. Adding a hot blue alien who said things like, *I want more of you,* would just make it so much more

appealing. These memories of him and Grampa's cabin would sustain me for the rest of my life, and I would make the best of it.

So I pushed all thoughts of the future away from me and did what I do best, compartmentalize.

"So do I," I told him.

The beeping of the coffeemaker brought us back to reality. For now. For some reason, I was certain that later there would be the *more* he had promised.

I repeated my earlier question that started the kissing but rephrased it a little. "Let's find out how you like your coffee."

I handed him the cup and bit down the *careful it's hot*, customary remark, because I remembered that temperatures didn't faze him. Instead I said, "Try a sip."

He did and made a face, making me smile. "Alright, try it now," I added a teaspoon of sugar.

He made another face, and I handed him my cup. "Do you like it like this?"

His lips tilted upward. "It tastes of you, perfect."

For some reason, his words went straight to my pussy, intensifying the already existing pulse in my clit. The image his words created in my mind wetted my canal, and I barely managed to hold back the delicious shudder that rolled through me.

“Come, you must be hungry.” Food was the furthest thing from my mind, but I busied myself collecting the ready bacon, a plate filled with pancakes, and the syrup I had heated.

I shooed him to the dining table and fixed a plate for him. From the way he liked his coffee, I assumed he liked things sweet and poured a generous amount of syrup over his pancakes, then I sat across from him, needing some distance. Still, with his long legs and the small table, our knees met underneath it.

He watched me cut into my pancake and imitated my moves, but where my fork stopped halfway to my mouth to drink him in, his moved between his lips. The expression of bliss on his face when he tasted the first bite made me all kinds of fuzzy and warm inside.

“This is delicious,” he praised.

“Wait until you taste the bacon,” I promised. I had always loved the way the sweetness of the pancake contradicted the salty, harder texture of bacon, and it seemed he appreciated it too, as a moan escaped him.

“Amber, this is the best damn meal I ever had, besides your stew last night.”

I beamed at the compliment, although I had a hard time imagining his words to be true since he had arrived in a freaking spaceship, making it safe to assume he had traveled at least our galaxy, if not more.

That thought killed the magic moment for me though, and I asked, “So, are you going out to explore today?”

He looked up from his food, and I regretted my words, because he, too, looked as if he had been caught up in whatever magic weaved between us and forgotten who he was and why.

“I suppose I should.” He took a sip of his coffee and regarded me over the rim with unreadable eyes.

“What exactly are you supposed to be exploring? I mean, are you going to collect rock samples? Please don’t say you’ll be picking up animals.” *Or humans*, my mind added, *and if you do, take me*. That idea sent a rush of excitement through me. Getting away from all this seemed like a perfect solution.

“Mostly, I would like to see more of you... humans,” he said.

“You’re not going to hurt them, are you?” I blurted out and realized too late that I might offend him with my question.

He shook his head. “No, I just want to get to know you, get a feeling of how evolved your planet is.”

“Oh.” I nodded as if that made perfect sense. “I could take you to town, but...” With his blue skin, he would stick out like a sore thumb.

As if reading my mind, he pointed up and down his body. “Earthlings would notice me.”

I nodded.

He waved into the air and the hovering tablet I had seen before appeared as if out of thin air. Curiously, I asked, “Is that always there?”

I couldn’t resist touching it, but when I reached forward, there was only air. He laughed. “It’s only a projection to make it easier for my mind to move through the database.”

“The database is in your head?” I asked, stunned.

He shook his head and reached behind his ear where I now noticed a small object sticking out. “It’s here. A few years ago, our scientists tried implants, but it turned out they were too much for us, so they created this interface and the projected screen. It’s easier to adapt to.”

I nodded as if this made perfect sense and, in a way, it did. Tangible objects, even if they were projections, would be easier to handle. I could only imagine the data tsunami an implant would create inside any active mind.

My musings stopped cold when Galexor’s skin color began to change in front of my eyes. It became lighter until an olive hue made him look... more human, making me wonder if his whole persona was an illusion. Did he look like a lizard underneath? Strangely, I didn’t really care, but still, I had to ask.

“Can you change everything about you?”

“Do you not like how I look?” he asked back, looking insecure.

I giggled. “No, I like how you look, blue, brown, yellow, I don’t care. I was just curious since you changed your color this easily, if what I see is really you.”

He nodded. “Yes, big and blue, that’s me. Will I fit in like this?”

“All the women will fawn over you,” I said before I could stop myself. But it was true. With his now olive skin, dark brown eyes, and black hair he looked like... well, tall, dark, and handsome, almost every woman’s wet dream, but I wasn’t going to tell him *that*.

He laughed. “I only want one female to *fawn* over me.”

There it was again. I swallowed. Could this man be any more perfect?

“I have a favor to ask,” he said before I could make a complete fool of myself by jumping over the table and attacking him.

“Name it. I owe you big for saving me.”

“I don’t want you to feel that way at all.” He tilted his head, and his expression said that he meant it.

A nervous giggle escaped me. “Alright. Still, I would like to do a favor for you.”

“Would you be my guide and show me around?”

My little heart fluttered at the idea of walking through town with him. “I would love to.”

“Good.” His wide smile made my stomach somersault. He rose and began to collect our dishes. Funny, I didn’t even remember eating, but miraculously, our plates were empty.

“Here, let me,” I protested, but he shook his head.

“You cooked the food, allow me to clean up,” he offered before he added, “just tell me how.”

“Why don’t we do it together, and then you can do it next time?” I suggested.

“Does that mean you will cook for me again?” His eyes were so warm, I nearly melted.

“Of course,” I promised.

We worked in perfect tandem; the only unsettling thing was the change in his skin color. It was weird thinking that I had only known him for a few hours, but I had already become accustomed to his strange blue skin so much that his olive tone now threw me off.

When the last dish was packed into the dishwasher and the counters sparkling clean again, he asked me if I was ready. I took a full look at him and shook my head. “Your uniform, you’ll still stick out. We need to change that.”

“Unfortunately, other than giving the illusion of a different skin color or scales on my skin, there is not much I can do about that.”

“I can though,” I said and marched into the one room in the cabin that had been off limits since my grampa’s death. “Come with me.”

My grandfather had been a tall man, but not as tall as Galexor. I rummaged through his closet and found a pair of dark gray sweatpants that he always had to roll up. They would still be a bit too short for Galexor, but they would have to do, same with a sweatshirt I bought for Grandpa a few years ago. The label said L, but it had turned out to be an XXL. Probably still too small for Galexor, but again, it would do.

“Try these,” I instructed and waited in the living room for him to return.

It didn't take long, and when he stepped out, he easily passed for a very tall, very handsome human man. The too short pants were hidden by his uniform boots, which I hoped nobody would inspect too closely. As I had worried, the sweatshirt was too snug on him but not in a bad way. It showed off his muscular body that would attract far more stares than the slightly ill-fitting clothes.

“That'll do,” I nodded. “But if you want to repeat this excursion, I suggest we buy you some properly fitting clothes in town.”

“I don't expect they will accept Galactic credits?” he asked, only half joking.

“Probably not, but don't worry about it. I have money. I can buy you clothes,” I offered, pushing thoughts of how little money I had in the bank away. Two weeks, I had promised myself. Two weeks where I would do as I pleased, consequences be damned.

He scoffed. “I will not allow my female to buy me clothes.”

My heart hitched happily at him calling me *my* female, but I waved him off. “Don’t worry.”

“I do though. You’re already doing so much for me. I can pay.”

Dubiously, I waited for him to return to Grampa’s room from where he retrieved his pants. From inside hidden pockets, he pulled something out and offered it to me on his palm. “Will they accept that?”

Incredulously, I stared at a handful of the rarest diamonds I had ever seen—not that I had seen many diamonds in my life, but one look at the sparkling rocks was all it took to know they were special.

“Where...” I waved my hand. “Never mind, Galexor, this is a small fortune.” I had not the faintest idea about the value of them, but what he held out had to be worth hundreds of thousands of dollars, maybe a million.

I picked one. “We’ll take this one to the jeweler in town. He’ll probably cheat you,” I warned.

“Will he give me Earth money for it?”

“Most likely not even half of what this is worth,” I cautioned again.

He shrugged. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Don’t tell me they grow on trees where you come from,” I said jokingly.

“Not quite, but they’re easy to come by. A quick analysis before I left indicated they were valuable here.”

“People kill for them,” I agreed.

“Why? They’re just rocks, they’re not even big enough to sculpt into anything, they don’t hold a charge, they—”

“Are very pretty,” I interrupted. “And women like to wear them on their hands.”

“Really?”

“Don’t the women of your...” I almost said country, but that wasn’t quite right. Galaxy? Universe? Species?

“I suppose they like to wear pretty gems,” Galexor allowed, “but they’re usually more colorful than this.”

“It’s in the sparkle,” I explained and held the diamond up. As pretty as it was though, it hadn’t been cut like the others I had seen on Earth.

“Hold on,” I moved back into Grampa’s room, where Grandma’s old jewelry box stood in a corner. Technically it was mine now, but I had never taken anything out to wear it. I had been too afraid to lose a piece of her or my mom.

It didn’t take long to find the half carat solitaire that had been my mother’s wedding band and bring it to Galexor. “This was my mother’s wedding band, a ring given to her by my father to show the world they were married,” I explained while I held the ring in the light so it could sparkle off the cut surface.

Carefully, as if he sensed how much this ring meant to me, he picked it up and imitated my moves. He scrutinized it between narrowed eyes. “That looks like good craftsmanship. You must have excellent gem workers here.”

“Jewelers, yes.” I nodded and took the ring back to return it to its box.

It was kind of sad, the ring was indeed magnificently cut. Grampa told me that my father had bought it from one of the most accomplished jewelers and spent more than the diamond was worth just because of who had done the work. The ring was supposed to be worn, shown off, see the sunlight. Instead, it had been sitting inside a dark box for decades.

On a whim, I put the ring on my middle finger, deciding since I was going into town with an alien, I might as well live dangerously in other ways as well. The ring was meant to be worn and loved. It had belonged to my mom, and now I would carry something of hers with me on a not quite date, but as close to it as I had come to in years. In a way, I felt as if she was with me.

Galexor noted the ring on my hand but didn't say anything when I grabbed my purse and coat. I apologized that I didn't have a coat for him, but he would have looked too out of place in Grampa's.

“The cold, as you call it, doesn't bother me,” he said as if reading my mind.

“I know, but you will still look out of place,” I fretted. It was barely thirty degrees outside.

“We’ll go to the jeweler first, then we’ll buy me some clothes so you can relax,” Galexor suggested, and I gave in, it was the best we could do.

My truck stood outside where I left it yesterday morning, unlocked and with the keys in the ignition. Nobody came out this way, and even if they did, nobody stole anything around here. I slipped behind the steering wheel and noticed Galexor curiously observing me as I pumped the clutch a few times before I turned the key and the old truck sputtered and rumbled but came to life. Cold air rushed out of the vents, and I turned it down, giving it time to warm up.

I turned on the wipers to get the snow from last night off. “Buckle up.”

“Buckle what?” Galexor asked.

With a grin, I leaned over him and felt his sharp intake of breath at our closeness. I pulled the seatbelt from the side and moved it over him.

“You are tying me up? Why?”

I laughed. “You wish.”

His eyebrows rose in challenge, and I laughed harder. More to hide how much his words turned me on though. Because having his delicious body bound to the bed, while I kissed every inch... I shook my head to stop the flow of intimate images forming inside. *Focus!* What was wrong with me? Ever since I met Galexor, my mind had turned into an abyss of dirty images. If he could figure out half of them, he would

jump onto his spaceship and take off. *Or not*, my mind teased, and if my mind had eyebrows, it would have suggestively wiggled them.

“It’s for your safety in case we have an accident. The seat belt will keep you safe and—”

“Accident?”

“Like if another vehicle hits us,” I explained.

“This contraption is not safe?”

“Well, the roads are icy and—”

“The vehicle will not stay on the road if it’s icy?”

I sighed. “Galexor.”

He raised his hands. “Fine, I’ll trust you.”

“Thank you!” I said with an exaggerated huff and put my seatbelt on.

“Accidents happen sometimes. That’s why they’re called accidents. Don’t your spaceships...” Unfortunately, I had no comeback as much as I racked my brain.

“We don’t have *accidents*. Our spaceships don’t fly on ice, and they don’t run into each other.”

Feeling a bit defensive toward my species, I said, “Most cars have more safety features now. This truck is very old, twenty years or so, it doesn’t have any of the fancy stuff the newer vehicles have.”

“You should buy a newer vehicle then.”

“They cost a lot of money,” I said, putting Ol’ Nelly, as I called the truck, into gear.

“Safety should always come first,” Galexor lectured.

“Well, some of us don’t have pockets full of diamonds,” I snapped.

“I’ll give you some diamonds if you promise to buy a new car.”

He said it so sincerely, I nearly lost my footing on the clutch before I switched gears. “I can’t take your diamonds.”

“Why not? As you pointed out, I have a lot of them, and they don’t mean anything to me.”

I turned the truck in the driveway, wishing I had never brought the damn diamonds up, because now I couldn’t stop thinking how they would allow me to pay back the mortgage Grampa had taken out and be able to keep the cottage.

I ground my teeth and took us onto the snow-covered road that had become invisible overnight. Ed, the snowplow man, must have not gotten out this far yet, I figured.

“So will you?” Galexor prompted.

“Will I what?” I played dumb.

“Take a couple of my diamonds and buy a newer car?”

“This truck belonged to my grampa. I’ll never let it go,” I explained, hoping he would let the subject go now.

“That’s fine. You can have upgrades done to it.”

No such luck. Galexor was still going. I sighed again. “That’s not how it works with our vehicles.”

Just then, Ol ‘Nelly skidded, and I balanced the steering not to lose control.

“I think I would feel better if you let me drive,” Galexor suggested.

“Have you ever driven on ice?”

“I’m a pilot.”

“Driving and flying are different.”

He crossed his arms over his chest and harrumphed but stayed quiet until we hit the forest road. Ed must have been here because the roads were clear. I grumbled. Grampa and Ed had always been at odds because Ed always cut corners where he could and one of them was our driveway.

It didn’t matter, Ol’ Nelly was more than up for the challenge, and now we were on the county road.

I drove slower than I did during the other seasons of the year, and it took us twenty minutes longer to reach town, but when we did, it left me as breathless as always, especially during the holiday season. Any holiday season really, because the town went as crazy over Easter, Fourth of July, Halloween, and all the other holidays as it did over Christmas. Christmas was just special to me.

Main street was old-fashioned and exaggerated. Two lanes on each side were divided by a, normally grassy, midsection

decorated with giant snowflakes and colorful boxes of fake presents.

The streets on both sides of the road were lined with old-fashioned gas lanterns, which were decorated with strings of twinkling lights arranged in artful arches. I hoped we would stay in town long enough for it to be dark before we drove home so Galexor could see the lights in all their splendor.

Businesses on both sides of the street were busy. Even though according to the last census there were only nine thousand people living in our town, the population quadrupled during the winter. A famous ski resort was only an hour's drive from here, and our town, Charming, had become famous for being... well charming, a few decades ago, and turned into a major shopping hub. Which explained the four-lane main street.

Right now, we could have used six or eight as Ol' Nelly slowly crawled forward because of all the tourist traffic. Finally, we reached Mel's diner, where I stopped. Mel had a parking lot behind her diner that was barred off by a chain with a lock and only the locals knew the code for it, otherwise it would have been impossible to find a spot for Ol' Nelly. I put the truck in park, and ignoring the honking cars, I opened the chain blocking Mel's parking lot off.

"I could have helped, if you would have said something," Galexor remarked with a slight note of hurt in his voice.

He was right. "I'm sorry. I'm so used to doing everything on my own."

“I’m here. I’m happy to help.”

I turned the truck into the lot, not caring about the obscene hand gestures and honking from passing cars.

“I’ll be better, I promise.” I gave him a bright smile, and Galexor shook his head, but he was smiling too.

“Now where to?” he asked when we exited the truck, and I replaced the lock on the chain.

“That way,” I waved down main street, passing several shops. All decorated in the Christmas theme, and all filled with customers. Charming was booming thanks to the tourists. Only a few people like my grampa, who had worked for the water company, hadn’t gotten rich off the tourist’s backs.

He could have. He could have painted rocks and sold them at the stores and people would have bought them. Charming was that popular. He could have built another house and rented it out, even as far out as we were. That hadn’t been my grampa though. He didn’t like other people, and he liked their money even less.

Galexor stopped in front of a wide storefront to stare at a toy train making its rounds across a miniature town that looked exactly like Charming, except we didn’t have a train.

“That’s astonishing,” Galexor marveled.

“Don’t...” I searched my memory for his species name and was grateful when it came to me, “Scekyns children play with toys?”

“Nothing like this,” he said as his eyes followed the train.
“Do your people travel in these things?”

“They’re called trains, and yes, we use them to transport goods around the country and for people to travel. You don’t have those?”

“We have conveyance tubes that transport goods and people for most planetary travel. They are underground though and very fast.”

“Then people can’t see where they’re going,” I pointed out.

“No,” he shook his head and looked up from the train. “Then again, our cities are not this... charming.”

“What do your cities look like?” I asked, intrigued.

“Tall, overcrowded,” he searched for words.

“We have those too. You just happened to land in the most beautiful town on Earth.”

This time when his eyes met mine, they were downright smoldering, and I swallowed to dispel the sexual attraction growing between us. If this continued, I would rip his clothes off before we made it back home.

“I most definitely found the most beautiful human female.”

Oh God, I felt the need to take my jacket off as heat spread through me. This man sure had a way with words.

“The jeweler is over there.” I cleared my throat and pointed a few stores down.

The streets were filled with people whose hands were overflowing with shopping bags, but I noticed how Galexor curiously took in some couples who were holding hands.

“Is that another one of your customs?”

“Yes, couples like to hold hands,” I said.

“Interesting,” he remarked and folded my hand into his.

More warmth spread through me, and my flesh tingled where it met his. Yes, our sexual attraction was definitely growing. Honestly though, at this point, I was beginning to worry more about my heart than my virtue. This man was getting under my skin like no other ever had.



AMBER'S LITTLE TOWN WAS pretty. I had never seen the sense of shopping before. All I needed was a place to sleep, eat, to be with my family, and a ship to fly. I had never given decorations or things a thought, but after seeing Amber's cozy house stuffed to the rafters with knickknacks, I understood the appeal.

I noticed how she stole occasional glances at the ring she said had been her mother's, how sometimes she twisted it and smiled, and I wondered if it was like the pictures hanging on her wall, making her remember a loved one.

We had pictures of course. They were stored on my data processor, but I had never collected any mementos, not like Amber did, and judging by what all these stores offered and the many customers inside, she wasn't the only one.

After we sold the diamond at the jewelry store, where Amber assured me the owner, Mike, had definitely underpaid me, I bought a sweatshirt that read, *Charming has my heart*, which was utter nonsense, but for some reason, I could see myself

wearing it years from now and remembering this day, this moment.

I would remember walking hand in hand with Amber through this, yes, charming town, while what she called snow slowly began to fall. The sky was beginning to darken again, but it never slowed down the number of people milling about. I knew that whenever I would wear this sweatshirt, I would remember the touch of her skin against mine as we held hands and how the snowflakes felt melting on my face.

This world of hers was very different from mine, but I liked it. I liked it a lot.

Main street wasn't that long, but there were so many stores on each side that it took us hours to make our way down one end. We reached the town's park, that was filled with half open tents where more people peddled their wares, reminding me of peasant like markets I had seen on other, underdeveloped planets, but here it looked just downright... charming like everything else in this town.

“Are you getting hungry?” she asked and pulled me toward a vendor.

Now that she mentioned it, I realized I was getting hungry. The different aromas in the air made my mouth water, even though I couldn't place them.

“Here, how about a hot dog? It'll warm our tummies. Oh, hi, Chris, are you one of the elves this year?”

Curiously, I eyed the female Amber had called Chris, who seemed about her age. She was dressed in a green and red dress, with a black belt, and striped, ridiculous-looking tight pants. Her cheeks were overly red, making me wonder if she was cold.

The most curious thing about her though were her long pointy ears. The only other species I had ever seen with ears like that were the Eneclates, but their skin was green and scaly. If this female was an Eneclate, her disguise wasn't very good. But then I noticed more people dressed similarly to Chris, with pointy ears, and when one took them off, I realized they were only some kind of accessory.

“Who is your friend?” Chris asked, eyeing me up and down.

“Oh, this is Galexor,” Amber offered. “He and I are... friends from college. He's visiting for the holidays.”

“Galexor, that's an unusual name. I like it. Hi!”

“Galexor, this is Chris, an old friend from school,” Amber introduced.

“Hi,” I replied. “Nice to meet you.”

“Likewise.” She gave me a once over, and when she thought I wasn't looking, her eyes widened at Amber and she mouthed, *wow*, before she turned more solemn. “It must be lonely without your grandpa. I'm glad you invited a *friend*,” Chris said, putting a strange emphasis on the word friend.

“Hi, Amber, I haven't seen you in ages,” another female exclaimed in a shrill, loud voice. A group of males and

females looking about the same age as Amber and Chris approached us.

“I’ve been thinking about you all alone in that cabin of yours,” the same female continued. “I’m glad to see you invited a *friend*.” She put the same emphasis on friend as Chris had and her eyes moved meaningfully to our still clasped hands.

“Hey. Yeah, it got kind of... lonely, so I invited Galexor. Galexor, this is Kasey, Alex, Robert, Stacy, and Maggie.”

The group nodded at me, and I nodded back, trying to figure out who was who, but giving up as the only one of them I could identify by name, Kasey, continued. “I’ve been meaning to come by. I’m sorry. I wanted to invite you to our Christmas party. You and Galexor are, of course, both welcome.”

“Thank you, Kasey, that means a lot,” Amber said, but her tone didn’t match her words.

“My dad said the bank is taking your place. That sucks, man,” one of the males said, bobbing his head up and down.

While I tried to make sense of his words, one of the other females chimed in, “Yeah, they shouldn’t be allowed to do that. That cabin has been in your family for what? Generations?”

I could tell that Amber was getting embarrassed, but thankfully Chris interrupted, “Here are your hot dogs. That’s six fifty.”

Six fifty, I figured meant six dollars and fifty cents according to what Amber had explained to me about the Earthling's money system, and I pulled out a twenty.

“Keep the change,” I added with a grin because I had also learned it was customary to tip.

Chris's eyes lit up. I must have overtipped her. “Thank you.”

Amber gave me a look, making me aware of what I had already realized, but I didn't care. The jeweler gave me a thousand five hundred dollars for my diamond, and I was happy with that. More so when I could make somebody else happy with it.

“Here, grab some water, on the house,” Chris handed us two bottles.

“Thanks, Chris. We'll see you all later.” Amber pulled my hand, obviously eager to get away from the group.

“Your friends?” I asked when we were out of earshot and found an empty bench, which turned out to be a small feat with all the people around.

“We went to school together,” Amber said and bit into her hotdog, indicating she didn't want to talk about it.

I followed suit and took a bite too. The hotdog was a bit too chewy for my taste, but I liked the red stuff Amber asked Chris to put all over our food.

“So, you got some clothes. Is there anything else you want to shop for?” Amber asked between bites.

I would have liked to buy a few of the picture frames I saw in one of the stores earlier, but I could tell that Amber was getting eager to leave. So I shrugged. “We can come back another day.”

I didn't think she realized it, but she let out a deep sigh of relief, and I wondered why she didn't want to spend more time with her friends.

When I moved from one ship to another and ran into a group of old friends, we usually hung out for hours in one of the many spirit holes aboard the ships to catch up and get drunk. I realized that Amber's and my situations were a bit different, since she had been born and grown up here, but still, from what I gathered, she had been away for a while at college.

She must have noticed my questioning look and smiled wryly. “I don't feel so well and all these people... it's a bit much.”

That, too, I could understand. Her cottage was very isolated. I didn't think she was used to being around this many people, and contrary to me, she didn't have any curiosity to satisfy by sticking around and observing the multitude of humans who seemed to come in all colors, except maybe red, green, and blue.

“We can go anytime you're ready,” I offered.

She stuffed the rest of the hotdog into her mouth and wiped her lips before she rose. “If you're sure you're okay with it?”

I nodded. She did look tired, and we could come back another day.

It didn't take us quite as long to walk back to her car using the other side of the street, but I did manage to catch a few glimpses at what the various stores offered and hoped we would come back here soon.

Neither Adred nor my father would truly appreciate it, but I saw a few things I wanted to buy for them. Starting with a Charming shirt.

When we reached her truck, I asked, "Will you teach me how to drive this thing?"

"Absolutely, but not tonight. It's getting dark, and you don't have any identification if the cops pull us over."

Cops, my translator told me, were the authorities, but the question of identification threw me off, didn't they have data systems that would keep track of their people? Especially since this was just one planet? That would be easy to hack into for my father's computer specialists.

I opened Amber's door for her before I hopped over to the other side and took a seat on the old, worn-out seat. I swear, I felt a spring digging into my ass and adjusted how I sat.

I could have done it myself, but I intentionally fumbled with the seatbelt until Amber leaned over to help me again, which was exactly what I had hoped she would do. I had barely been able to contain myself when she had done so the first time

around when she leaned over, so temptingly close to me that all I wanted was to kiss her again.

Her sweet scent enveloped me, and my cock, which had been stiff all day, twitched with desire for her.

When I looked up though, I noticed dark circles under her eyes. She looked tired.

We both forgot about the lock and chain, but this time, after asking for the code for the it, I jumped out of the truck before she could. The lock was primitive and opened quickly. I pulled the chain to the side and waited for Amber to drive through before I reengaged it. Then I buckled myself, and Amber took off before I had clicked it into place.

Her voice sounded tired, but she explained how the truck worked on our way out of town, which looked just as charming as the name said.

Twinkling lights, like the ones by Amber's house, decorated storefronts, the sides of the streets, were strung between street lanterns, over bushes, and really any place they would fit.

It could have looked tacky, but it didn't. Nothing in Charming did, except maybe some of the tourists.

Attentively, I watched as Amber's foot engaged and disengaged what she called a clutch, gave it gas, and turned the wheel. Instinctively, my feet picked up what she showed me as I shadowed her moves. I memorized them, because I would be damned if I would allow her to chauffeur me around one more time, especially as tired as she looked.

She coughed a few times, and I noticed that she made some strange sucking sounds with her nose.

“Are you getting sick?” I asked.

“I think so.” She gave me an apologetic look. “I’ll be okay though. A few aspirin and a stiff tea along with a good night’s sleep will do the trick. I’m sorry though because I don’t think I’ll be much company tonight.”

“Don’t worry. I need to write a report to my commander anyway.” I waved her off.

“Oh yeah? What will it say? Met humans today, ate some hotdogs?” she teased.

“Something like that.” I nodded. “It’ll be a bit more technical and descriptive, like how your truck works and how humans interact with one another.”

“Why do I not feel like a guinea pig?” she asked before her arm flew across my chest, and she hit the brakes.

I looked up to see an adorable animal standing in the street, staring at us with large, brown eyes, unmoving as if hypnotized.

The truck began to swerve to the side, but the animal still didn’t move. I worried we would hit a tree as we skidded closer and closer toward the tree line.

But then the truck came to a standstill and the animal gave us one more derisive look before it jumped off and vanished into the darkness.

“Are you okay?” Amber asked in a slightly shaking voice.

“I am,” I assured her. “Are you?”

“Freaking deer scared me.” She shook her head. “This is why I drive so slow around here. The damn things just freeze in the headlights.”

“It was cute though,” I offered, taking her shaking hand. “You did good. You didn’t get any of us killed.”

She turned her head to me and grinned. “I didn’t, did I?”

“Nope,” I shook my head. She looked so damn adorable, I just wanted to kiss her.

“Alright, let’s get home.” Surehandedly she put the truck in reverse, and I couldn’t help but admire her. She looked tired as hell, and yet her reaction had rivaled that of an experienced fighter pilot about to hit a meteor.

She drove home even slower than before, and when she exited the truck, I pulled her into my arms and carried her. Her head snuggled against my chest and that plus her earlier words about *going home*, made my heart beat faster and rose a longing inside it that I had never felt before. *Home*, I thought.

Home for me had been aboard a ship for as long as I could remember. The ships always changed, only the company, my dad, and brother didn’t.

I suspected I would have enjoyed more of a home had my mother not died unexpectedly during a freak meteor shower while she was returning from a trip to see her parents. But this was the first time I ever wondered how different things would

have been for me growing up planetside instead of aboard whatever flagship my father commanded that week.

Later, we settled down to staying aboard a flagship for years, but by then I was already attending pilot training.

Now though, a deep yearning stirred inside me for a real home, a place to return to after a long trip in space, a place like Amber's cabin. Maybe even with young ones of our own running wild.

The front door was unlocked, something unheard of where I came from. All our doors were secured and could only be opened by the resident or somebody the resident had programmed into the system. Not that we had much crime in the Galactic Union, especially not aboard the flagships, where security was at its tightest, but it wasn't unheard of. I imagined a Class-D planet had a lot more violence and crime than we did, but I supposed it must have been confined to certain areas for Amber to feel this safe.

She was almost asleep by the time I found the light switch and carried her to where I knew her bedroom was. I hadn't been in here before but would have recognized it as hers even if I hadn't watched her enter and exit it.

Soft white and lilac checkered curtains were open, exposing a paneled window, and I froze for a moment, mesmerized by the white surrounding each of the squares as snow still fell outside. Ice was creeping along the edges but hadn't made it all the way to the centers of the squares yet, leaving slightly

obscured patches open. Their crystalline patterns looked heartbreakingly beautiful.

Outside, I made out the dark outlines of trees contrasting with the white blanket on the ground, an incredibly breathtaking sight.

A small sigh from Amber reminded me that I was still carrying her and took her to her bed, carefully avoiding piles of discarded clothes and an assortment of stacked books.

In the corner by the window stood a small round table, filled with what I recognized as an old-fashioned computer, as I had seen something similar in one of our museums once, and several notepads stacked on top of each other, threatening to spill over at the slightest tremor.

Shoes littering the floor made for a regular minefield, but I managed to get her to bed.

I carefully laid her on top of a thick, also checkered comforter, and took her boots off. She barely stirred, and I contemplated putting her fully clothed underneath her covers or taking them off.

Either way, I peeled her out of her jacket. Something about her listless body alarmed me though, and when I touched her skin, I realized she was a lot hotter than she had been before.

My hastily opened data processor confirmed that her body temperature had risen a few degrees.

“Amber, Amber, wake up.”

I shook her slightly and her eyes opened. “Galexor.”

“I’m here, but you seem to have a fever. Tell me what to do, Amber.”

“Hmm,” she blinked a few times, “Aspirin and water.”

She pointed toward a small whitish bottle on her nightstand, but when I pulled it open, there were only two pills inside. “There are only two, Amber.”

She coughed and stretched her hand out. “It’s okay, that’ll do,” she reassured me and sat up. Her eyes looked glassy and had a faraway look I didn’t like. She gave me a soft smile. “Don’t worry, it’s just a cold. I’ll be better in the morning.”

Next to the pills was a half empty bottle of water. I unscrewed it and handed it to her before she swallowed the pills down.

“What can I do?” I offered.

“Could you hand me the pajamas over there?” She pointed at a pile in a corner made up of several pieces of clothing, but I thought I found what she was asking for when I spotted a fuzzy, warm-looking top and matching pants decorated with all kinds of animals wearing Santa hats.

“I’ll be alright, Galexor,” she assured me with a smile.

Torn between wanting to give her privacy and the need to stay and assure that she indeed would be alright, I made my way to the door. “Do you mind if I leave it open so you can call out to me if you need anything?”

“That would be nice. Good night, Galexor.”

“Good night, Amber.”

I left the door only partially closed and went back outside to the truck holding my newly acquired clothing, including a pair of ridiculous-looking pajamas. The red pants weren't too bad, but the red top made me look like the Santa I had seen in pictures. Except for the belly and that my hair was black and not white.

I used the bathroom to get ready for another night on Amber's couch, but before I turned the lights off, I snuck one last look into Amber's room. Soft snoring announced that she was out, and I tiptoed to the bed. I wasn't creeping on her; I just wanted to make sure she wasn't as hot any longer and was comfortable.

She wasn't hot; she was shivering. I pulled the blankets up over her and tucked her in, but her body continued to shiver.

A quick access of my data processor, which I linked to the human network, told me everything and more than I needed to know about colds. It mentioned shared body heat, and I liked that idea. It gave me an excuse to climb into bed and snuggle up next to her.



MY FEVER BROKE SOMETIME in the early morning hours, and I woke to strong arms holding me pressed tightly against a hard body. I blinked and noticed the blue skin of his forearms.

Thankful that he had turned his camouflage off and was back to being *my* Galexor, I let out a deep sigh of relief.

Something hard was poking into my ass and my lips curved at the realization that alien males experienced morning wood like human men.

Had I not felt disgusting from freezing and sweating all night, I would have turned in his arms to see where things would lead us. As it was though, I moved carefully out from his grip.

He sighed in his sleep and a sound of protest left his lips, but he didn't wake. His still form was mesmerizing though, and I took a moment to fully take him in.

The red pajama top looked hot on him. It contrasted nicely with his blue skin. His black beard looked thicker than before

and sexy as sin.

Shower, I admonished myself, *shower, and maybe then you can... wake him with kisses?* I liked that idea, liked it very much.

I slipped into the adjoining bathroom, which Grampa had added when I turned twelve, to take a shower. On my way in, I glanced into the mirror and winced. *Maybe he doesn't want somebody with those circles under their eyes waking him*, my mind warned. I looked like death warmed over.

The shower, however, revived me enough that when I glanced into the mirror again, it wasn't too bad. Not great, but as good as it would get, I supposed.

Thankfully, there were some semi clean clothes in the bathroom as well, since I hadn't been foresighted enough to bring some with me. I put them on and peeked around the half-open door. Galexor was still out.

Chickening out about the whole waking him with kisses thing and walking on tiptoes, I snuck into the kitchen to get the morning started with a coffee.

While I waited, my eyes fell on a basket filled with all the ingredients I needed for my baking endeavor. I was a day behind schedule, but determined, I decided I would make up for it and bake the day away.

Unless Galexor wants to go back to town, my all too practical mind whispered. *Or maybe I can talk him into*

helping me, I argued with myself and liked the idea. He was here, after all, to learn things. Well, I would teach him baking.

From a high shelf, I fished out Grandma's old recipe book and, as always, marveled at her neat penmanship. The notebook was organized by holidays and filled with pretty stickers and helpful hints. She had had the entire baking process down to the last detail and listed the first steps before I even turned to the actual recipes.

Turn oven on, get butter out of fridge, get baking dish ready for fudge and so on. Most of the steps and recipes I knew by heart, but it felt good having the book next to me, as if she were here, cheering me on.

Low, old-fashioned Christmas music played from the radio by the windowsill as I tied my favorite apron around me and began measuring all the ingredients for Grandma's famous fudge first.

When Grampa and I first started following her recipes, we quickly learned the hard way that all the ingredients had already been doubled so we could make enough goodies for all the neighbors and would still be able to feed an army that never arrived.

For some reason though, that day I felt like I should double up everything one more time. I couldn't have said why, maybe it was a premonition or maybe just the holiday spirit, but I pulled four instead of two of Grandma's fudge dishes out and began adding the first ingredients to the melting butter on the stove.

Next came the sugar, and soon I was lost in mixing and creating, so lost actually, that I jumped when blue arms suddenly surrounded me from behind and warm lips nuzzled my neck.

“Hmm, you smell delicious.”

His voice sent warm shivers down my spine, and I leaned into him. “Good morning.”

I turned in his arms to look at his face. His eyes were all pupils as they regarded me, and I saw my own reflection looking back at me. He didn't say anything, he didn't need to. Over the last few days, the sexual tension had increased with every passing minute and we both knew it was time to release it.

“You look sexy in this...”

“Apron,” I provided.

“I would love to see you wearing nothing but that... apron.”

Somehow, he managed to make the word apron sound naughty and sexy at the same time. He was making me feel naughty and sexy.

His lips descended on mine and my arms moved around his neck. Uncaring, I dropped the spatula and dug one of my hands into his thick hair while the other held on to his neck.

I opened my mouth to allow his tongue in and moaned when it met mine. The kiss was everything I had dreamed of and read about but had never experienced before. It made my

stomach flutter and sent an electrical current through me, turning me into a hyper-charged mess.

He easily lifted me off my feet and on to the counter. Seated, I spread my legs, and he moved in between them, holding me tight while our tongues danced a dance as old as time.

My hands moved underneath his shirt, up his back so my palms could explore his massive, hard back muscles that trembled underneath them.

The kiss intensified. His hands explored my back just as I was his, heating my body, but not from a fever this time.

Impatiently, I tugged his shirt up, and he accommodated me by raising his arms so I could pull the shirt off him. The movement forced us to break our kiss, but now I was able to leisurely take in his magnificent chest. Chiseled didn't even come close to describing the many ropes of muscles coiling underneath his skin.

Gentle hands first lifted the apron's loop over my head, before my shirt found the same fate as his, joining the spoon on the floor. I looked up nervously, wondering if he found my torso as arousing as I did his. His tongue licked his lips, which were spread into a wide grin. "You are stunningly beautiful, Amber."

Normally, I would have self-consciously crossed my arms over my chest, but with him I felt desired and found myself becoming daring. "Do your women look like this?"

“Not even close,” he rasped. His tone sent goosebumps all over my flesh. I was aware he hadn’t really answered my question, but that didn’t matter. Right now, I wasn’t really interested in alien anatomy, at least not female alien anatomy. His on the other hand...

His hands reached behind me, untied the apron’s laces next to take it off, and let it fall to the ground. Then, with one hand, he lifted me, and with the other, he pulled my pants down.

Naked, and with my legs spread wide, I sat on the counter, open for his perusal, and the raw hunger I saw in his eyes wiped all notions of self-consciousness from my mind.

His hands moved to my breasts, cupped both of them, and my head fell back while I took a sharp intake of breath at the sensation of his palm on my sensitive flesh.

“So beautiful,” he said hoarsely before his head dipped to take one of my nipples into his mouth.

Could a girl come from a guy just playing with her tits? I was damn close to it. Moisture gathered in my pussy, more than I had ever thought possible.

He expertly kneaded one breast while cupping the other so he could keep my nipple in his mouth, and his tongue played around the hard bud. He sucked and more liquid ran down my pussy, drenching me.

I squirmed and my breathing increased.

“You are so fucking hot,” he said when his lips lifted.

Before I could protest, he lowered himself, and all the while, his mouth trailed down my abdomen. His hands followed his path on both of my sides, anchoring finally on my hips and then his mouth was *there*, doing the same thing to my clit as it had done to my nipple, and my elbows, which carried all my weight at that point, began to shake.

His hands scooted my hips forward, so I sat on the very edge of the counter, and his tongue glid down my slit from one end to the other, turning me into a mess of heated sensations that made my clit throb.

One of his hands left my hip, parted my folds, and fingers dove inside me, fucked me to the rhythm of his tongue caressing my clit, and I came so hard, liquid ran down my leg.

“You taste fucking amazing,” he said when he came up, sucking his lips in to get the last bit of my taste, causing my body to shudder even more.

I was still in the throes of my orgasm when he plucked me off the counter and carried me to my bed.

I didn't know how, but somehow, he lost his pants on the way, and while I lay spread wide on the bed, staring up at him, I got a glimpse of a hard, massive cock as he stroked it. I didn't have time to contemplate how in the hell this thing was going to fit inside me, because all I could think of was his cock inside me, filling me. My clit and my pussy throbbed with need even though I just came with the most explosive orgasm of my life.

Somewhere on the periphery of my consciousness, my mind and body jubilated, because I just came, by a man, no alien, not by stimulating myself. But that thought was short-lived as he moved forward like a panther and knelt between my legs. I scooted up to give him room and then his hard shaft began to enter me. It was everything my pussy had yearned for. Hard, thick, and long. So long that when he was fully sheathed, it bordered at the point of pain.

I mewled when his hips retreated and gasped when he reentered.

“Gods, you feel good. So tight and wet,” he panted.

His fingers entwined with my hair, and he lifted my head off the bed so our lips could meet. His tongue shot into my mouth just like his cock did into my pussy. I barely kept up with his rhythm as my muscles began to tighten and a deep humming spread through my body, originating from my core.

It started in my toes and rushed from there throughout my entire body, my loins, my torso, my arms. It made my fingertips tingle, and then a hot bubble burst inside me, and I cried out in bliss as another orgasm hit me.

“Amber!” he bellowed, and I felt him stiffen above me and then the hot sensation of his seed spilled into my womb.

Thankfully, I was on the pill, but for just a short moment, I thought about the condoms in my nightstand, the *just in case* condoms that had gone completely forgotten when *just in case* happened. Never in my life had I been this swept off my feet. No matter how archaic this expression might have been, that

was exactly what had just happened to me. He had literally swept me off my feet and had made me forget everything.

My entire body tingled, and his cock twitched inside me, sending more waves of pleasure through me.

He was still panting when he kissed my face, my nose, my lips, my cheeks, before he rested his forehead against mine and an incredible feeling of belonging added to the pleasure already coursing through me.

Gentle hands moved up and down my flesh, spreading even more comfort through me.

“You are incredible,” he breathed.

“Right back at you.” I gnawed indecisively on my lips, unsure if I should tell him, but then the words flowed out of me. “You made me come twice, Galexor. Twice!”

“You say that as if it was the first time.” He smiled.

“The first time anybody has ever made me come,” I confessed.

“You have never been with another male before?” He wrinkled his forehead.

“No, no, I have, but they never... I never...”

He stared at me in disbelief. “What kind of male would not make sure you came?”

“The same kind that doesn’t care?” I said with a smirk.

“Hmm.” He moved his loins and I noticed he was still hard.

“Oh,” I moaned at the unexpected stimulation against my oversensitive clit.

He did it again, watching me intently.

“Oh, Galexor,” I curled my toes, on the verge of coming again.

In quick succession, he moved in and out, hitting all the right spots, and within seconds, I exploded all around him. He groaned before another rush of wet heat filled me.

He grinned sheepishly. “That was unintended,” he said, and I knew he meant his own orgasm. “But your walls... the way they milk my cock...” He shook his head, closed his eyes, and just seemed to bathe in the bliss of it.

A wave of pride swelled inside me. He might have begun this second round wanting to make me come, but it had been *my* body—*me!*—who brought this bliss to him.

He pulled out of me and rolled to his side, turning me with him so my cheek came to rest on the crook of his arm, while the same arm pulled me possessively against him.

“I’ve never felt like this before either,” he confessed, making me all warm and fuzzy inside.



A LOUD PING BROUGHT us both back to reality.

“Oh, my brownies,” Amber squealed and ran into the kitchen.

Curiously, I followed her and watched her, bare-ass naked, putting on some oversized red gloves. She pulled a dish out of the oven and my cock twitched at the sight of her glorious, naked body holding up a steaming dish that smelled delicious.

“Galexor, can you... the towel,” She moved a Santa-printed piece of cloth on the ground with her foot, making me admire her body and balance.

I picked up the towel. “Where do you want it?”

“If you could just fold it over the counter?”

I did as asked, and she placed the dish on top of it. “There,” she said, self-satisfied. “Can you grab another?”

I didn’t think she had any idea what she was doing to me, but she bent back over the oven, giving me a shot of her full,

round ass cheeks as well as her cunt, and I nearly came for a third time that morning.

I realized though that she was pulling out another dish and prepared the counter for her so she could place the second baking dish on it and then a third.

When she pulled out a fourth, giving me another glance at her rounded ass, I couldn't stop myself. As soon as the dish was securely placed on the counter, I grabbed her hips from behind and bent her over another counter.

Her deep moan told me she was more than ready and more than welcomed my advances, and I plowed into her from behind as if my life depended on it, and for all I knew, it did at that moment.

Gods, her cunt was so tight, I was sure I could get lost in it forever.

Holding on to her hips, her earlier words came to me about how she had had sex with other males but had never come with them, and I made sure to control myself and wait until she came.

And when she did, it was with abandon, all around my cock, milking me so hard, I saw stars.

When we were both able to breathe again, I carried her into the shower, where I lived another daydream of mine, one I had yesterday when I experienced the human shower for the first time, and took her again under the running water.

Finally, we both seemed to be satisfied for the time being.

“What do you want to do today?” I asked her when we were both dressed, and I helped her fix a breakfast of sausage and waffles.

“I need to get the Christmas baking done if you can wait another day before going back to town.”

“How can I help?” I asked. The only thing I wanted to explore for the rest of my life was her.

“You want to help me bake?” she clarified.

“I’m at your disposal.” I bowed mockingly.

Her smile was so bright, I nearly pulled her into my arms again, but I gathered that this baking thing was something important to her, so I stopped myself.

“Alright. Help,” she nodded vigorously. “Let’s get some eggs cracking.”

I had no idea what she meant, but I quickly learned and admitted that cracking the white and brown eggs was truly satisfying.

Next, she taught me how to separate the white from the yellow, which was even more satisfying.

It was nothing though compared to when she showed me how to cut cookies with cookie cutters from the dough she had me roll out flat.

Soon we were working in tandem, and I didn’t think I had ever enjoyed myself this much.

“Do you only do this for Christmas?” I wanted to know, arranging the cut-out dough on a cookie sheet lined with parchment paper.

“My grandma has recipes for all occasions, but Christmas was the one time she baked every year to make little baskets for the neighbors. Who, in turn, do the same thing. You’ll see, in a couple of days, there’ll be baskets lined up with the most delicious—” she broke off and stared at me. “Will you be here that long?”

“If you’ll have me,” I nodded, holding my breath, unsure of what to do or say should she not want me to stay.

“You can stay as long as you want... or at least as long as I’m going to stay.”

“Where are you going?” I asked, alarmed.

She shrugged, looking suddenly sad. “I don’t know yet. I’ll have to figure it out.”

“I thought you liked it here.”

She inhaled deeply, and I realized she was on the verge of tears, and I rushed to her side, pulling her into my arms. “Hey, no tears. Tell me what’s going on.”

Amber sniffed and if I hadn’t been so concerned, I would have found another reason to adore her. “My grampa, I didn’t know... he borrowed money from the bank to pay for my school.”

“You have to pay for your school?”

“College, yes,” she nodded.

“College?”

“It’s where you go for higher learning, for jobs that require more than hands-on training,” she explained.

We had that too, but I had never even considered who paid for it, the Galactic Union I assumed. When we began our career path, everything was paid for, room, board. All that was expected was to keep up with grades, and even for that help was available for free.

That wasn’t the issue though, and I remained quiet on that. “So your grampa borrowed money?”

“Yes, he was paying it back from his social security income, which is money the government gives you when you get too old to work,” she added before I could ask. “But, when he died and I didn’t get the job I was expecting to get hired on for, I defaulted on the loan, and now... now the bank wants to take it all back.”

“What can we do?” I demanded. “I have enough diamonds. I can help.”

She sniffed sweetly and looked up at me. “I can’t ask that of you.”

“You’re not. I’m offering.”

“It’s too much money. I could never accept that,” she protested, but I saw a glimmer of hope in her eyes and latched on.

“You can pay me back if you insist. Just remember those diamonds hardly cost me anything.”

She wiped her eyes and stared up at me in wonder as if nobody had ever tried to help her.

“I’ll do anything for you, Amber,” I added, hoping to convince her.

“Oh, Galexor.” She snuggled into my chest. “Let’s not talk about this for a few days, okay? Let’s just enjoy each other’s company.”

That I could easily do. “It’ll be my pleasure.”

We returned to melting chocolate and cutting out more cookies in various recipes of doughs. One I found especially intriguing was gingerbread. It tasted the best to me too.

“What profession did you learn that you can’t find a job for?” I asked as I smeared blue icing on a snowflake shaped cookie.

“Programmer and app development,” she explained. “It was just unfortunate that a few major companies went bankrupt right after I graduated. Now the job market is flooded with people like me. Only the others have more experience under their belts than me.”

She took a minute to show me on her phone what a programmer and app developer was.

I gave her a once over. “Don’t take this the wrong way, I don’t doubt your intelligence for one second, but you don’t strike me as a data person.”

She laughed., “Funny, that’s what most of my coworkers and professors said too. But none of them could tell me what I struck them as either.”

“This.” I spread my arms indicating the kitchen. “You have been cooking for and feeding me since I arrived, now you’re baking for the entire neighborhood, and you seem to truly enjoy it.”

She stared at me thoughtfully. “Actually, I’ve always liked baking.”

“What made you decide on programming then?”

She thought about it for a moment. “I always liked the idea of creating things, and with programming, you kind of bring things to life. And I’m not a big people person, so...” she trailed off.

“So you hid behind your laptop,” I finished.

“I wouldn’t say hid...” She mixed another batch of icing, adding food coloring to it that created the deepest green I had ever seen. “But, yeah, I get your point.”

An idea hit me. “Yesterday, you said people could paint rocks and the tourists would buy them, right?”

She looked up from mixing, realizing where I was going with that before she shook her head. “It’s not that easy.”

“Why not? Let’s take your cookies down to the market, sell them, and see what happens.”

“It’s not that easy,” she repeated. “You need to reserve a table, have a food handler license, and—”

“Let’s get you one.”

She stopped what she was doing. “You’re serious?”

“Damn right I am.”

“Let’s do it!” She grinned widely. “But let’s finish this first.”



I FELT MORE ALIVE with Galexor than I ever had in my life. It seemed as if anything that had ever held me back was easier with him. He was easy to talk to, easy to be around, encouraging and everything my grampa told me a man should be. I was sure he would have liked Galexor and Galexor him. It made me sad that the two had never met, but in my heart, I knew that Grampa approved.

We spent the rest of the day baking, decorating, and cooking, interrupted only by sex, after some chocolate dribbled down my mouth and Galexor licked it off. He then insisted that he had to inspect the rest of my body for any more *contraband* chocolate that might have gone astray, and before I knew it, I lay naked on the kitchen floor with his tongue all over me.

Afterward, I insisted on dipping his deep blue cock into white icing, pretending I wanted to check the consistency, before I repaid the favor and had him writhing on the ground.

I don't think Grandma's kitchen had ever seen this much action, and if it had, I didn't want to know about it. But we did

things that would have chased Santa and all his elves off. Naughty things I was sure would take me off his list for good.

By the time we were done, it was dark outside.

“Now what?” Galexor asked.

I would have suggested a walk down to the lake, but I was exhausted, so I offered, “Why don’t we order a pizza and watch a movie?”

“Pizza? Movie?”

Oh boy, was he in for a treat.

I ordered from the only place in town that delivered out here and only because the owner, Max, had a huge crush on me since high school. While we waited, we tidied up the kitchen and put all our goods into the old Tupperware containers my grandma had bought decades ago.

Galexor insisted on paying for the pizza and even though he changed his skin color to the same olive hue he had before, I was sure Max’s eyes must have bugged out of his head when he delivered the pizza himself thirty minutes later. I would have felt bad for him if he hadn’t been such a douche. He always pretended he was God’s gift to women, and I was sure his crush on me was only because I had never fallen for him and taken him up on any of his offers to go out on a date with him.

In the meantime, I prepared the couch with blankets, turned the heater up just a tad, filled two glasses with wine and picked a movie. Since it was the holiday season, and this was

Galexor's first time watching one, I picked *Elf*, because it was funny and would give him a better idea about the holiday. Afterward, I decided, if we made it that far, we would go with *Die Hard*, which had been my grampa's favorite.

I remembered us arguing every year. I would point out that it really wasn't a Christmas movie, and he would point out that there was a tree, gifts, and Christmas music, which defined the qualifying parameters for him.

Either way, Galexor was a guy, and if I was to introduce him to the whole movie experience, I might as well do it the right way.

Minutes later, we each had a slice of pizza in our hands and were snuggled up on the couch as *Elf* started.

Elf had always been my favorite, but watching it with Galexor was a whole new experience. He laughed so hard, he nearly rolled us both off the couch, which ended up in lovemaking, and me rewinding it when we were done. And yes, rewind. Despite my grampa adapting to all things technology, he insisted a movie was only good when watched on VHS.

"I think I like your Earth life," Galexor said when we made it through *Die Hard*, and he carried me off to bed. "I can't wait to do this again tomorrow."

I snuggled into his chest and fell asleep, thinking about how much I liked that idea. Just as much as I liked waking up in his arms the next morning and hoped there would be many more like that.

After breakfast, he helped me prepare the baskets for the neighbors and we took them around. As per custom, I didn't linger to chat. I placed the basket by the front door, rang the bell, and jumped into the truck, driven by Galexor, who took to driving as if he had done so all his life. Even the clutch didn't give him any problems. And I realized I should have expected that from a space pilot.

Then it was off to town hall to fill out the necessary paperwork to start my very own baking store. There were already several in town, so I didn't think one more would piss anybody off unnecessarily. I even started my own LLC and called it Grandma's Baked Goods.

Unfortunately, I couldn't get an appointment to have my kitchen inspected until after Christmas and counted myself lucky they didn't make me wait for after New Year's.

Hope flared inside me when we stopped by the bank to ask for an extension on the loan. Unfortunately, that hope was cut short by a very unfriendly banker, somebody who must have just moved here and whom I had never seen before.

"Don't worry, I will loan you the money," Galexor insisted.

I didn't think I could take his offer though. My grandfather had raised me to be independent, plus, even as much as Galexor and I got along, we hadn't known each other for even a week yet. Not to mention the fact that he was an alien.

Something I did forget more and more, even when he pranced around half naked, not camouflaging his blue skin.

We ate in town, and I was very much aware of the looks from anybody who knew me. Thankfully, there weren't that many, because us townspeople tended to stay away from main street during the tourist season.

Galexor leaned over the table and whispered, "This food is good, but yours is better."

I giggled, feeling very much like a teenager on her first date. The flutter in my stomach was constant and the need to touch him all the time to make sure he was really here was nearly overwhelming. It didn't help that he was the most attentive man I had ever met. He helped me into my jacket, my chair, refilled my glass of water, basically read every need I had and fulfilled it. That included our sex. Which was simply out of this world.

Just like I had predicted, over the course of the next few days, baskets with goodies arrived from the neighbors, and soon my house really did look like a bakery.

"We'll never be able to eat all this," I groaned when I stuffed myself on another piece of Terrie's famous brittle.

Galexor, who was actually putting a pretty good dent in all the baskets, conceded, "I think you're right."

An idea seemed to occur to him. "You know who would though?"

I shook my head, debating if my waistline could take another piece of Mable's fudge and decided that with all the sex we

were having, I was probably burning a shitload of calories and popped the deliciousness into my mouth.

“My fellow pilots on board the flagship. I think even my dad and brother would enjoy them, despite being a bit uptight.”

My eyes grew large, and a clump filled my stomach. “Will you come back?”

He instantly pulled me into his arms. “I could never leave you, Amber. We belong together. I thought we’d go deliver them together.”

“What?” Adrenaline shot through me. He wanted to take me up to a spaceship? He wanted me to fly with him on a... spaceship?

“What will your commanders say?” I wondered. I dated a soldier in college for a few weeks and getting on and off the base had been quite the undertaking.

“Well, that might pose a problem, but a male should be able to show his girlfriend off to his father and brother.”

“What are you implying?” I asked suspiciously.

“My dad is kinda the commanding officer of our fleet, well, all fleets in the Galactic Union.”

“Wow,” I let out a deep breath and repeated, “Wow,” when I slowly absorbed the implications of what he just told me.

I had no idea how big the Galactic Union was, how many members it had or anything, but it had to be big. Probably

bigger than I could possibly imagine. Probably like dating a four-star general's son. *Times ten or more*, my mind added.

“And your brother?”

“He's kinda his second-in-command,” Galexor said with a crooked grin.

“And you?”

He shrugged. “I'm more of a test pilot, the risk taker in the family. I never wanted any of the accolades and responsibilities that come with my father's and brother's higher titles.”

“Test pilot?” If he was anything like what I imagined the title implied, he was a born risk taker, a person who thrived on adrenaline rushes. I blinked a few times, because suddenly my little illusion of us playing house here seemed to dissolve. How could he possibly ever be happy playing house here with me, on Earth, when he flew fucking test spaceships through space?

“Amber? What is it?”

Galexor was sensitive enough to pick up on the sudden downturn in my mood.

“I'm... I'm just a bit overwhelmed,” I said, not wanting to go into the whole busted bubble thing.

“It's more than that,” he observed, taking my chin into his hand and gently forcing me to look into his eyes.

I sighed. Of course he wouldn't let go.

“It’s just... you’re a test pilot.”

“So what?”

“You fly through space,” I said with more force than I meant to. “You love taking risks and trying new things, new spaceships. This,” I waved my hand around the kitchen, “is not a spaceship.”

At that, we both laughed a little nervously.

“Are you worried I’ll get bored with you?” he asked directly.

Miserably, I nodded. I didn’t want to admit it, but it was there.

He kissed my lips. “I could never get bored of you, Amber. This,” he waved his arms like I had, but not mockingly, “is a new adventure for me, and the more I immerse myself into it, the more I’m starting to like it.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that if you’re willing to, I’m willing to give this a try, us. To give us a chance to see where this relationship goes.”

“But... but your job?”

“Will always be there if things don’t work out. That’s the beauty of being the High Commander’s son.”

I nibbled on my lip. He was asking me to take a risk on him. A huge risk. He wasn’t like any other boyfriend who I could call up when we had a fight to apologize, or to chase down when he misbehaved. He would take off into freaking space

and never be heard from again. He would be the one with all the power.

“What if we have a fight, and you take off in your spaceship?” I voiced my fears.

“I would never do that, Amber,” he replied sincerely enough for me to believe him. Then again, how many girls had fallen for that line, not coming from an alien?

“Look, I know you’re taking a much bigger risk than me here, but I’m asking you to trust me.” His eyes smoldered and conveyed sincerity.

He was asking me to fully open my heart to him, to let him in and live with the fear or worry that he could just be gone one day, and when I say gone, I mean gone as in unreachable gone. Forever. With no chance of stalking him or trying to convince him to come back.

Then again, if he did, would I even want him back?

Wasn’t getting into a relationship, any relationship, a risk?

And wasn’t he taking a risk too? Whenever somebody came by, or he went into town, he would have to disguise who he really was. If the government ever found out he was an alien, they could chase him down, take him away.

“Let’s just see where this takes us, Amber, okay? One step at a time.”

As if hypnotized, I found myself nodding. “Okay.”

He smiled broadly. “Okay!”



“ARE YOU READY TO meet my family?” He asked.

That question alone would make any girl nervous, but when the family in question were aliens on board a freaking alien fleet orbiting Earth, that question took on a whole new level of significance.

“Don’t worry, my father and brother will love you. They might question your sanity for wanting to be with me, but they’ll treat you respectfully.”

I wasn’t sure if him putting so much emphasis on how *respectfully* his family would treat me was reassuring or scaring me more, but I nodded, telling myself that every girl was nervous when they met their boyfriend’s family.

Wait. Was that what he was? My boyfriend? I giggled because calling Galexor my boyfriend was like calling a lion a kitty. Totally inadequate.

“Do I have to go back into the lake?” I asked, remembering that this was where he had *parked*, or whatever it was called,

his spaceship.

“Considering how sick you got last time?” He shook his head. “Absolutely not. We’ll wait until nightfall, and then I’ll get the ship out of the water and pick you up.”

I giggled nervously. Absolutely normal date. Boyfriend picking me up to meet his family—in a spaceship.

“It’ll be alright.”

I nodded and righted the peppermint bark in one of the gift baskets we were taking *up there* with us.

I fretted over what to wear for what seemed an eternity. In the meantime, Galexor picked up all my shoes and righted them on a shoe rack by the door—who would have thought I had three pairs of black boots? I could only ever find one.

Next, we picked up all my laundry strewn over the bedroom floor, my bed—which wasn’t entirely my fault—and the bathroom. Again, who would have thought I had two red sweaters? We even found my long-lost charm bracelet inside one of my shoes underneath my desk.

Finally, I settled on a green Christmas sweater, black pants, and boots. I fretted some more over my makeup until Galexor took the eyeliner from my fingers. “You look beautiful, Amber. They will love you no matter what.”

Darkness fell early in the wintertime in the mountains. Come four thirty, it was pitch black, and I waited on the pier for Galexor to bring his spaceship out of the water.

Just like the first night I met him, the sky was crystal clear, filled with a myriad of stars. Only the moon looked a bit paler and thinner than last time.

I nervously stepped from one foot to the other, keeping my gaze on the lake's still surface.

Bubbles rose first, then the smooth surface began to wave slightly, and soon bigger waves lapped at the lakeshore.

I wasn't sure what I had expected, well probably something round, the typical UFO disk, but what came out of the water reminded me more of a boat than a spaceship. A sealed off boat, without a deck.

It was shaped like an arrow at the front, with tiny wings at the back. It was black and the size of a yacht, of which many floated up and down the river not far from here in the summer, because it had access to the ocean.

Like a boat, it floated silently to the pier. Barely touching it, it came to a standstill, and a door opened like a hatch.

“Hey,” Galexor appeared.

I handed him the obscene number of baskets neighbors had brought and some of ours first, while I giggled nervously at the thought of Mrs. Pruitt never knowing aliens would devour her famous Mooseheads this year.

Then it was my turn. This time, Galexor's hand extended toward me. “Don't be afraid, I've got you.”

I held on to his hand with a death grip, while my right foot searched for purchase on his ship's hull.

He didn't rush me, he stood there patiently, holding my hand, ready to catch me should I slip.

A tremor moved through me when my foot rested on his spaceship, and then I pulled the other over. *Holy cow, I'm standing on a freaking spaceship.*

"Come on in." He gently pulled me toward the hatch, which was bigger up close than it had been standing on the pier.

A stairway led inside a well-lit corridor, but no matter how hard I looked, I couldn't find one single light source. The illumination never faded in any spot, it was perfectly balanced.

The corridor was filled with three doors on each side, of which one stood open, and I made out all our baskets on the floor.

Galexor led me past it, straight for one single door right ahead of us. "The bridge," he announced and allowed me to enter first.

Two large, slanted windows greeted me, giving me a view of my pier and house. That's when I remembered that we were still on the lake, but the ship didn't move with the small waves at all, it stood perfectly still, as if I were standing on solid ground.

The bridge wasn't very large, but everything you would expect from an alien spaceship. Two captain chairs stood next to each other, facing the inverted, slanted windows, surrounded by blinking readouts in a triangular formation.

“Here, have a seat,” he directed me into one of the chairs before he took the other one me.

A console rose from the floor between my legs, wedging me into the chair more securely while keeping me comfortable. I watched the same thing happening to Galexor, only a hologram sprang up from his console, similar to his data processor screen, just larger and filled with readouts.

His fingers began to dance over the hologram, and it was surreal to watch the tips of his fingers basically vanishing into thin air.

A slight humming sound and vibration moved through the ship, but I suspected I only heard and felt it because all my senses were utterly attuned to what was happening around me. Similar to when the ship lifted, and I was only aware of it because the view in the windows changed.

We lifted straight up, like a helicopter only without all the noise and rumbling. We went higher and higher, and soon, no matter how much I stretched my neck, I couldn't see my little lake house any longer. Not much longer after that, even the lake itself was swallowed up in darkness.

The stars were getting closer, and I waited for the ear popping that I usually experienced on a plane when it began to rise, but nothing happened.

Suddenly, things became a blur. The ship took off so fast I was getting dizzy.

“Are you alright?”

“A bit dizzy,” I confessed.

“You’re doing great, no worry, the dizziness will fade.”

And then we were in space.

My mouth fell open, and my eyes widened. A small gasp escaped my lips at the sight I had seen a hundred times on TV, the internet, magazines, you name it, but had never, ever, in my wildest dreams, thought to experience firsthand.

“Wow!”

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” he asked, staring down at Earth, which was swirling in white clouds and blue oceans. “I felt a connection from the very first time I laid eyes on your planet.”

I didn’t know what amazed me more, the sight, the realization that I was in space, that I had felt nothing when we entered and left the atmosphere, or that I was on an alien ship. Everything seemed like a dream.

Things became even more surreal when we passed the moon so close, I could make out all the little and big craters. Soon a beautiful, ginormous planet came into sight. Browns, whites, reds, and even blues swirled around it, making me think of a giant marble. *Jupiter*, I thought, recalling my little knowledge of our solar system, which I had brushed up on a couple of years ago to help with developing a space app that, unfortunately, went nowhere.

Behind Jupiter, another astonishing sight captivated me even more, a fleet so large, I didn’t even attempt to count the myriad of ships in it. Most ships varied in size, and if I went

by my computer game knowledge, I made out battleships, fighters, and transporters.

The bigger ships seemed stationary, although I assumed that to be an optical illusion, while handfuls of smaller ships flew in between and from one to the other like ferries shuttling people and goods from an island to the mainland.

“How... how did our radars not pick you up?” I asked, even though that was one of the furthest things on my mind, because holy crap, that was a lot of ships.

“Deflectors,” Galexor said, never taking his eyes off the monitor in front of him. His fingers had picked up speed on it ever since we rounded Jupiter.

“It took us years to get a rover to Mars,” I remarked, while digesting that our journey to Jupiter took less than a few minutes.

“Like I said, Class-D planet,” Galexor pointed out with a wink.

“You know, I’m really offended that we’re not even a C.” I said, grinning.

“I think you’re missing the point. Z is the most advanced planetary system, like the Galactic Union.”

“You’re kidding,” I spat out, truly taken aback now. “Right? Please tell me you’re joking.”

One look into his face told me he wasn’t. *Wow*, I thought, and here us humans were, thinking ourselves so superior.

“You’ll have to teach me all the different criteria,” I requested because I was truly intrigued.

“I will try, even though I’m not sure your little Class-D brain can take all the information,” he snickered, winking at me again.

If there had been anything within reach I could have thrown at him, I would have. Instead, I had to content myself with sticking my tongue out at him.

“Exactly my point,” he laughed.

I added my middle finger and his laughter only deepened.

I shook my head and chose to ignore him to take in the sight of the fleet slowly drawing nearer.

One ship stood out in particular. It was so big, our little vessel appeared like an ant next to a skateboard. There were no wings, no fin at the end—if that even was the end. Again, it reminded me more of a large boat than a plane or my imaginings of what a spaceship should look like.

As we flew closer, I noticed even more ships coming and going than I had previously assumed. It wasn’t quite beehive traffic, but definitely more than on, let’s say, a cruise ship being readied.

Our ship flew toward an open hatch and through a short, narrow tunnel before we entered a larger hangar. Drones and robots moved in on us the moment Galexor brought our ship to a standstill.

The console thing between my legs retracted back into the floor and then there was Galexor, offering his hand to me. “Careful, you might be a bit dizzy.”

That was an understatement. For a moment, I thought I would throw up as I stood and the entire bridge spun around me. Galexor’s hands steadied me, otherwise I would have sunk back into the chair.

“Trust me, it’s easier to walk it off.”

Each step felt as if I was floating inside a violently swirling tornado. But he was right, I was beginning to feel a bit better with each step. I did feel heavier though and assumed the gravity had to be different aboard this ship.

We reached the corridor and walked past the room with all the baskets. “Wait shouldn’t we—”

“The drones will come and get them,” Galexor said offhandedly, and led me back to the open hatch.

First, I climbed the small latter up, then another down on the other side.

As soon as we were out, drones descended on the hatch, and I figured Galexor must have programmed them, because even before we were about to leave the hangar, drones carrying our baskets passed us by.

I hadn’t seen any other aliens like Galexor yet, or anybody looking different from him, because I assumed Galactic Union meant the merger of many different species, but that changed

when we entered a larger hallway, where two aliens approached us.

One looked like Galexor, the other more like a half lizard, and I tried my best not to stare at his scaly golden skin. Both wore the same uniform Galexor had worn when I first met him, only their color was red instead of black, making me wonder if the alien military was similar to ours on Earth, where different branches distinguished themselves with different colors from the others.

“The High Commander awaits you and your guest in his suite,” the female of the two said. “Please follow us.”

“I know where my father’s quarters are,” Galexor pressed out, not sounding pleased over having the two trailing us. Or, I allowed, they were more likely guarding us. I wasn’t sure. That would have explained Galexor’s obvious irritation though.

We stepped on something like a conveyor belt, and my dizziness returned as we walked down it while it carried us forward. Next to us was another conveyor belt going the opposite direction, but besides the four of us, there nobody else was around, making me wonder if that was a coincidence or by design, but I thought probably by design. I speculated that Galexor’s father wasn’t keen on having me, a human, seen by many of his crew.

Galexor hadn’t said much, but I could easily imagine him breaking several rules by bringing me here.

Sweat trickled down my back. What if his father arrested me? Arrested both of us? I doubted Galexor would be able to do anything about that. No matter how angry or irritated he might get.

That thought scared me, and I scolded myself that I should have thought this through better.

It was too late now though.

The belt suddenly parted into four different directions, and I followed Galexor's lead as he stepped over on another belt that would take us down a corridor to our right.

We stopped in front of a bank of elevators and here Galexor placed his arm around my shoulders and pulled me into his side.

"No worries," he whispered. I figured he must have noticed my growing tension and allowed myself to sink deeply into his embrace, inhaling his scent of cinnamon and ginger still lingering from our baking and something else, a scent that was entirely unique to him.

Doors opened to the side, and we entered a large, rounded space, making me feel as if we had entered a capsule. Soft music that didn't sound like anything I had ever heard on Earth accommodated our short trip up, and by the time we reached our intended level, I still hadn't figured out what the music was.

We moved through more empty corridors, and my suspicion that the hallways had been closed off for us intensified.

Finally, we stopped at the end of the hallway by two large doors, flanked by two aliens who reminded me more of creatures from hell than aliens. Black from head to toe, hairless with heads reminiscent of Anubis, they were more than fear inducing, and I found myself snuggling closer to Galexor, who didn't seem fazed at all.

“Devleroinzes,” he whispered to me. “The most fearsome watchdogs there ever were. They never sleep, and their only goal in life is to protect whoever they imprinted on.”

“Charming,” I muttered, but my fear and sarcasm were both silenced when we entered an airy, spacious room beyond anything I could have ever imagined aboard a spacecraft, even an alien one.

Large, triangular shaped windows interspaced with each other, alternating between right side up and upside down, gave me a spectacular view of Jupiter straight ahead of me.

Sleek, silver-white couches stood grouped on one side, facing the windows and a wall that reminded me of rock with water slowly trickling down it. On the bottom grew alien plants in deep purples and yellows, brightening the otherwise white and silver decorated room.

The flooring appeared to have been made from some kind of polished white material that shone like travertine, down to the same grayish streaks.

Along the walls, I made out several doors and could only guess as to where they might lead.

On the other side of the room stood a large desk and a dining area a little to the side.

My eyes, however, gravitated toward a desk, behind which sat a man who could have been Galexor's exact carbon copy, except he appeared several years older.

"Galexor, it's good to see you, son, and you brought a guest." The man rose to an impressive height and walked toward us.

"I'm High Commander Kzod Ghar-Huhn, and you must be Amber McGregor. Galexor told me a lot about you."

He had? "Thank you. It's a pleasure to meet you too."

"Sorry I'm late." The doors opened, and another man entered. The similarities between all three men were obvious, but where Kzod looked like an older version of Galexor, the man who had just entered looked only a couple of years older than Galexor and more... severe. As if the burden of the entire universe rested on his shoulders.

"Ah, Adred, I'm glad you could make the time. Amber, this is my oldest son, Adred," Kzod made the introductions.

"Nice to meet you," I held my hand out, first to Kzod, who, after an initial hesitation, took it, and, waiting for my example, finally shook it vigorously.

Adred was a bit more hesitant. His grip was firm, and I felt the suppressed hardness behind it.

"You are a human?" Adred asked when he relinquished my hand.

“Don’t be rude, you know what she is,” Galexor hissed.

“And you are a Scekyn,” I said, ignoring Galexor, eyeing Adred up and down like he did me.

His lips twitched slightly in what might have been a smile for him, and he gave me an imperceptible nod.

“Let’s have a seat,” Kzod suggested just when the doors opened again and a parade of drones entered, carrying baskets filled with baked Christmas goodies.

“Now what?” Kzod asked.

“We brought some presents,” Galexor explained, grinning widely.

“Presents?” Adred echoed as if the concept was alien to him. Which, I supposed, it was, given that they didn’t celebrate birthdays and Christmas.

“The humans have wonderful traditions. One of them is called Christmas,” Galexor explained his newfound knowledge, based on what I told him and countless Christmas movies we had watched together.

From out of nowhere, Galexor produced a red Santa hat I hadn’t even known he possessed and put it on his head. “Ho, ho, ho.”

A snort that turned into a full-blown laugh escaped me when I noticed the astonished faces of his father and older brother.

“You look ridiculous,” Adred hissed, making me wonder if he had any other tone of voice. Curiously, though, he stepped

toward one basket a drone placed on the large dining table, which was quickly becoming nearly invisible under all the other baskets.

“Try this.” Galexor picked up a piece of my peanut fudge and held it out to his brother.

I didn’t realize that I was holding my breath as I watched Adred’s scowl when he peeled the fudge from the candy wrapper. His scowl, however, changed the moment the fudge entered his mouth.

“Good, eh?” Galexor demanded, handing another piece to his father.



MY FATHER AND BROTHER may have both been battle-hardened, hard-core soldiers, but I knew their weaknesses. Even though we didn't have chocolate or cookies or any of the other goodies Amber and I had baked and cooked, we had similar sweets in the Galactic Union. I had never paid as close attention to cooking as I had with Amber, but I was quite sure that there was no sugar or chocolate in the entire Galactic Union. Our sweets were made from something similar to honey. Sap that was derived from fruits and flowers, some even from trees.

I put my arm around Amber and grabbed one of the baskets she and I had made and carried it to a smaller table by the couches, forcing the others to follow us.

My father typed a command into the table console and four cups of hot seclat, one of the Galactic Union's favorite warm drinks, which I thought compared somewhat to the coffee Amber liked so much and I had come to crave, appeared. It wasn't as bitter though and deep, dark red instead of black.

“So you decided to stay on Earth?” My father came straight to the point.

I felt Amber stiffen. Automatically I brushed my hand over her arm up and down to soothe her.

“Yes.” I reached for another peanut butter cookie because they were my favorite.

Kzod’s glance moved between Amber and me, took in the way we sat and something like a proud fatherly smile tugged at the corner of his lips. “Are you sure you’re ready to give up your rogue pilot days? Just before you left, you told me how flying a new prototype is what you lived for.”

I did. I remembered that conversation because my father had tried once again to convince me to return to officer training and join him and Adred at the top of the military.

“I do, but I found something much better and more fulfilling,” I said.

“I can’t protect you on Earth,” he warned.

“I’m a big boy,” I reassured him.

“You haven’t even known her a week,” Adred exploded. “I’m sorry,” he turned to Amber. “I mean no disrespect.”

“I told him the same thing,” Amber addressed Adred. “But we want to give this, us, a shot.”

“It may not be according to custom, but I know deep in my heart that Amber is the one,” I said looking only at her.

“Earth seems worth keeping an eye on,” my father said, before turning back to Amber. “I apologize if this sounds patronizing or condescending, but you are much more than I expected of a citizen from a Class-D planet.”

“I’m not offended,” Amber waved him off. “Seeing your technology,” she shook her head, “you are so far ahead of us, it’s humbling.”

I noticed something in Kzod’s eyes that I hadn’t seen very often, admiration. He liked Amber. “I will have ships return routinely, every Earth year, to keep an eye on it and... you.” He nodded at me.

“Gee, thanks, Dad,” I said in imitation of a movie I couldn’t remember the name of.

Amber chuckled appreciatively next to me, but as expected, the joke went over my father’s and Andred’s heads.

I didn’t want to overwhelm Amber completely. She was doing very well with my family and being aboard our flagship, but from the way her head was moving from different objects to another, I realized she was probably ready for a break.

“Is there anything you need?” my father asked, probably sensing I was about to call it a day.

My mind did a quick inventory of my room, but there was really nothing I wanted to take with me. Family pictures and books were on my data processor, I wouldn’t be able to wear my clothing, and I had never collected knickknacks like

Amber's. So I shook my head. "I think I have everything I need right here." I squeezed Amber's shoulder.

"We would be very happy if the two of you would join us on Christmas Eve for dinner and maybe even stay for Christmas morning. We could have breakfast together," Amber invited Kzod and Adred, surprising me.

"We can't possibly leave—" Adred started to decline, but surprising me even more, my father interrupted, "We would be honored."

Adred's startled glance toward our father told me he was just as astounded as me, but he recovered quickly. "Yes, that would be very nice."

I knew he meant it too. Besides his love of commanding others, Adred had always enjoyed learning about new cultures and getting to know new species.

"Great," Amber beamed at me.

"Great," I echoed, not quite as thrilled as her.

"We'll see you in a few days then," I said, standing and pulling Amber up with me.

"I'm looking forward to it," my father echoed, standing as well.

This time, shocking all three of us, Amber went first to my father then to Adred, to give them both a tight hug. "I promise we'll have a traditional Christmas dinner for you."

“If it’s as good as your goodies, I can’t wait,” Adred stated. “What about all this though? As good as it tastes, we can’t possibly eat all this alone.”

“Gee, Adred, where’s your Christmas spirit?” I chided with a laugh. “Share it with the crew.”

A small cleaning drone entered and began cleaning the windows. It was hard to miss Amber’s interest as her eyes followed the narrow disk. “Wow, those are pretty neat. We have Roombas that look like this, but I don’t think they’re quite as efficient.”

“You have cleaning drones?” my father asked.

Amber nodded. “If that’s what you call them, then yes. Probably not anywhere close to as sophisticated as yours, but they’re available.”

“Interesting.” My father rubbed his chin but didn’t elaborate.

“Are you tired?” I asked Amber when we were back aboard the XT4J.

“I’m exhausted,” she admitted. “I think this was just emotionally draining.”

I had already programmed our destination into the computer and could now take in Amber’s wide eyes as she stared out through the windows at space.

“You like it?” I asked.

“I’ve never seen anything like it. Simulations in movies are one thing, but this is quite different.”

I slowed the XT4J down a bit so that Amber could enjoy the scenic view a little bit better.

“Is that Mars?” She asked, pointing at a red planet in the distance.

“You tell me,” I laughed. “You’re the native. The computer says, T56U8.”

“Can we... could you take us closer?”

I was all too happy to oblige her small wish and watched her more than the ever-nearing red planet.

She sat up straighter in her chair; her eyes were large like disks now and an expression of utter elation sat on her face.

“Wow,” she exclaimed.

“Do you want me to take you closer? To the surface? We can’t get out, the atmosphere is not compatible with us, but—”

“Oh,” her head whipped toward me. “Can we?” She clapped her hands together in excitement and I was happy to take her on a tour.

For me there was nothing to see but red dust, but Amber seemed quite taken with the sight.

“Be careful, there is a rover here somewhere, we don’t want it to capture your ship on camera.”

“The XT4J has deflectors,” I explained. “We’d be nothing but a blur.”

“Oh my God, this is so exciting.”

You are exciting, I thought, and amazing, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I didn't think I would ever get enough of staring at her, taking her in and trying to figure out how to make that smile appear on her face or turn her eyes alight like this.

“Any other planet you would like to visit?” I asked after we finished a quick round over the planet she called Mars.

“Not today, but... can we do this again?”

“Any time you wish,” I promised.

She leaned back in the chair, and I took us back to the lake, where I floated the ship to the pier and helped her disembark before I parked my ship underneath the water again. It was after midnight, way later than we usually went to sleep.

Having been back aboard the fleet though, made me appreciate Amber's soft comforter and bed even more. Not that our quarters were uncomfortable on the cruiser. They were designed to give a body the ultimate rest, but there was something to be said about snuggling under warm blankets, especially with the female you loved.

The next morning, Amber worked on a website for *Grandma's Baked Goods* while I took a trip back into town. I hadn't told Amber, but I wasn't going back to Charming. Merging my data processor with the human website gave me more insight, and I learned that a bigger city wasn't that far from here. It was only another hour or so drive, and I had plans I didn't want her to find out about yet.

It wasn't that I didn't trust the citizens of Charming not to fill her in on my activities—I didn't—but I also didn't want to arouse too much suspicion by selling too many of my diamonds so close to where we lived. A larger city with many jewelry stores was exactly what I needed.

I was a bit bummed that I wouldn't be able to help her with the website because it sounded like fun, but my plans needed me to be away from her if I wanted to surprise her.

She handed me a long shopping list as well, because Christmas was in a few days, and my family would join us for dinner. I felt honored over her trust in me with finding the right ingredients, but she had insisted on me buying a *smartphone*, which I altered just a bit to include some of our technology, and thus equipped, I felt somewhat confident I would find all the things she was asking for. It even worked in my favor, because I cautioned, “It might take me hours in the store.”

“Call me if you need help,” she offered when I kissed her goodbye.

“I'm determined to fulfill this mission successfully and without help from mission control,” I laughed.

As hoped for, she giggled at my words. I always loved it when I could elicit this sweet sound from her.



WORKING ON THE WEBSITE filled me with so much joy and pride it was hard to describe. I worked through old shoeboxes filled with aged photographs of Grampa and Grandma. I copied old and crinkled recipes, making sure not to show the entire script, but it looked awesome in the background, as well as the pictures of my grandparents.

I worked so long and focused that I didn't even realize when it turned dark outside and only looked up when a pair of familiar headlights entered the driveway followed by Ol' Nelly's stuttering motor.

With a smile, I put the laptop aside and moved to the door. Chiding myself for being remiss, I turned the Christmas lights on to help Galexor find his way.

He blinked the headlights twice, telling me he had seen me before he turned the motor off.

A jolt rushed through me when I watched his massive form emerge from the old truck, and I realized how much I had

missed my blue alien, even though I had been deeply submerged in my work all day.

I ran to him and gave him a tight hug. “I missed you.”

“Liar, you had your nose in your laptop all day,” he grinned.

Warmth spread through me at the realization of how well he already knew me.

“I still missed you,” I pouted.

“I missed you more,” he said, planting a kiss on my lips. “Now shoo. Go inside before you get sick again.”

“I only got sick because you pushed me into the lake.”

He laughed. “I didn’t push you into the lake.”

“If it hadn’t been for your spaceship, I wouldn’t have stood so close to the edge and lost my footing.”

“I love the way you can make the most illogical thing sound logical,” he joked.

But then we both stilled and stared at each other.

“I love you,” he said, his words coming out in small puffs of mist, because the temperatures had fallen even more, but I didn’t feel the cold. At all. Because his words heated me from the inside out.

We hadn’t said them before. We had only known each other for a few days, still, I had never felt anything being truer in my life than when I responded, “I love you too.”

He picked me up and twirled me around while I laughed happily. “You just made me the happiest male in the universe.”

We stopped for a deep kiss, which he broke when he remembered the groceries that needed to be brought inside. I quickly helped him, and once it was done, we sat on the couch, sipping hot chocolate, and I showed him what I had been working on all day.

“Amber, this is great,” he praised. “Look at how much you’ve already accomplished. It’s ready to go live.”

I waved him off. “First, we need the license, and then we’ll need to start baking, then we can put the site live.”

“Put it live now so we’ll know what to bake,” he countered.

His idea wasn’t half bad, but I wasn’t ready yet.

“I still need to make up flyers and ask the other stores in town if I can put them up, then I need to learn how to run ads. People have to know about the site before they can order.”

“I’m here with you, every step of the way,” he promised.

I leaned up and kissed him. “I know. You have no idea how happy you make me, knowing you are here. And maybe, just maybe, we can make enough money to satisfy the bank enough not to close on my house just yet.”

I knew that dream was farfetched, but it was all I had to hold on to right now, and that was what I needed. I had a goal for the future and a boyfriend who would be by my side no matter what. The temptation to take him up on his offer to buy my house with his diamonds was still strong. I kept thinking about it and wondered if it wasn’t worth taking the risk versus losing the cabin that had been in my family for generations.

“I love you, Amber,” he whispered in my ear, sending goosebumps down my spine, awakening a familiar tingle between my legs.

“I love you too.”

I straddled his body and stared into his deep red eyes before I kissed him again. He was still growing his beard out, and it was becoming a bit scratchy. He promised he would shave it after the holidays. I figured he was planning something, but I didn't know what, so I let it be and put up with the slight stubble burn I received every time we were kissing. It wasn't that hard either, because quite frankly, to some extent, his stubble was quite the turn-on. Not only did it make him look more dangerous, but he knew how to apply the scratchiness to just the right places.

His hand moved under my shirt and cupped my breast through my bra. I loved when he did that, and I loved it even more when, like now, he pushed the bra up to have his palm caress my breast and slightly tweak my nipple.

Through the cloth of my pants, I felt his hardening erection press against my core and began to move my hips provocatively up and down and side to side. My efforts were rewarded by a deep moan, and his hand cupped my tit just a bit harder.

His other hand worked on my shirt, pulled it up and over my head, while I contorted to accommodate him.

Once it was over my head, he opened the clasp to my bra and off it went as well.

Despite the roaring fire in the fireplace, the air was a little bit chilly, but having it caress my overheated, naked skin was just the right contrast to arouse me even further.

Next, I pulled Galexor's shirt over his head to expose his mouthwatering pecs and abs. My palms couldn't seem to get enough of touching him. They moved over the grooves and valleys and made my blood sing with his hardness.

"Enough!" With a deep growl, Galexor lifted me easily off him and onto the couch. His hands moved to my pants, opened the button and zipper, and pulled them off me. My panties found a similar fate.

Kneeling between my legs, he lifted them up and lowered his head to feast on my core. My hands tried in vain to find purchase as he subjected me to the sweetest torture imaginable.

Unable to move much, my senses were overloaded with his hot tongue stroking and licking my most intimate folds and spots.

His hands grabbing my ass dug into my flesh deliciously, and I felt myself coming quickly. The moment his lips sealed around my clit, and I felt the pressure of his teeth against my most vulnerable flesh, knowing he would never hurt me, my insides exploded with a violent climax that left me panting.

But he wasn't done, far from it. He rearranged me so I lay face down, while his hands grabbed my hips and lifted my ass up into the air. His shaft entered me slowly, because he was so large and we were a tight fit, but each inch he gained made me

see stars. My juices flowed freely and lubricated him enough so he could soon easily pump in and out of me; languidly at first, he slowly began to move faster and harder. I moved my hips to meet his thrusts, while my heart rate increased and sweat poured down me.

I felt him stiffen right before he pumped his seed deep into me and when he roared, “MINE!” I lost it.

Swirling heat spread through me like an explosion, enveloped and carried me with it into the land of utter bliss. Where nothing existed but him and me and our pulsing bodies as I panted through my pleasure.

He collapsed on top of me, mindful of his weight. He nibbled on my earlobe. “I love you. You are incredible, Amber.”

“You’re not too bad yourself, Galexor,” I replied, still breathing hard.

His breath was hot on my still sensitive skin, arousing and comforting at the same time.

“How about you lie here for a moment while I fix us a hot bath,” he offered.

“You know what? That sounds heavenly,” I replied.

Next to the shower, which he liked to take about three times a day because he simply couldn’t get enough of it, the bath was his second favorite past time, and I couldn’t wait to go swimming in the lake with him in the summer. And hiking. And in the fall, we could go in search of wild blackberries and

raspberries for our cookies and pies. There was not one moment in our future I didn't look forward to.

Thoughts of losing this place entered my mind, but I pushed them successfully aside like I always did. This was not the time to think about it.

He handed the thick blanket he bought the other day at one of the stores over to me, and soon I heard the rushing of water in the bathtub.

The blanket was cozy and soft, softer than any of the old ones I had in the cottage, and as much as I felt I should dampen his shopping sprees, I realized if he and I were to live here together, we would need to make some changes, make this place ours.

If we managed to keep the bank at bay, I vowed we would clean the master bedroom out. It would be hard removing Grampa's things, but there was no sense in wasting the space on an unused, museum-like room. Grampa would have wanted that for me as well. There would be plenty of pictures and knickknacks everywhere that would remind me of him.

Galexor arrived, interrupting my musings and carried me to the bathtub. This was another thing I could easily get used to, the way he just seemed to love carrying me around.



I WAS MORE NERVOUS than ever when the morning of Christmas Eve rolled around. Kzod and Adred would be here in a few hours, expecting a traditional Christmas dinner.

First, Galexor and I tidied up the house and my room, since his father would be spending the night in it and Adred on the couch. Every time I thought about the big, hulking, scary alien High Commander bedding down in my lavender room, I had to suppress a giggle, and promised one more time that, should I be lucky enough to keep my house, Galexor and I would give it a complete makeover. Turning my room into a more fitting guest bedroom and changing the master bedroom for Galexor and me.

Galexor had even surprised me with making plans on how to add on to the small cabin. Adding multiple rooms to the sides, one to be our office and the other, he said with a wink, for our offspring.

I swallowed at the mention of babies, our babies. I knew things were progressing at hyperspeed. Galexor might have

been used to this kind of speed as a pilot, but I wasn't quite there yet, even though the notion of starting a family with him pleased me.

My life had been planned out so differently. Sure, kids and a family had been part of it, but first I had always assumed I would build a career for myself. Now everything was up in the air and for grabs. The weird thing was that it didn't scare me, it was the opposite; more and more I allowed myself to daydream of things to come.

Maybe it was because Galexor had entered my life at a point where I had been at my most vulnerable, or maybe it was because he was an alien, either way though, we were part of each other's lives now, and I wouldn't have wanted it any other way.

In the master bedroom, Galexor found another set of sheets that would fit my bed, one that wasn't lavender, and threw it into the washing machine. It still astonished me how quickly he adapted to human amenities, but for him, they were probably mere antiques.

"I'll ask Dad to get us a real cleaner unit," Galexor mumbled from the laundry room, making me smile at the way he was calling his father Dad now. We were definitely watching too many human movies. Galexor had taken to them with vigor. He explained that they didn't have anything like that in the Galactic Union, they had history reenactment, or science documentaries, but no science fiction. Everything in their culture was geared toward advancement and learning, from

toys for the children to entertainment for the adults, at least everything he had told me about so far.

I wondered if we would be fighting about how to raise and school our children in the future, but for some reason, I was sure Galexor and I would find the perfect middle ground.

A couple of generations back, my great-whatever-grandma had come from Germany, and their Christmas tradition had been a goose for Christmas Eve or Christmas Day. Over time, that goose had changed into a turkey, which was what I was making for us tonight and the roasting meat in the oven seemed to make Galexor extra hungry, because he nibbled on everything I put out.

“I’ll go get them,” Galexor said once it got dark outside.

“I’ll come with you,” I offered, and we walked hand in hand to the pier.

When the spaceship came into view, I was reminded of how Galexor and I met, which seemed forever ago but was in truth only a little over a week and marveled again at how close we had come in such a short time.

A low giggle escaped when I thought about my lake becoming a parking lot for alien spaceships, and Galexor gave me a questioning glance. Before I could fill him in though, we saw two forms swimming toward us. Galexor waved his flashlight to send them in the right direction, and I stared at the dark water, remembering with a shiver how I had fallen in and almost drowned. I squeezed Galexor’s hand.

“You saved me that day.”

He shook his head. “No, you saved me. You have no idea about what you have given me. Not only your love, but a meaning in life. A true meaning in life, better than risking it by testing a new protoship and running on adrenaline. Love is a much better motivator, trust me.”

I smiled at him and saw the truth reflected in his eyes, warming my heart. I had worried that one day he might look back at his military career and regret having chosen to become a baker instead, but right then, I knew that worry was groundless. I realized Galexor might have enjoyed the risks he took before, but now he was ready to settle down with me and build something that would support us for the rest of our lives rather than cutting it short.

Galexor gave his dad and Adred a hand to pull them up onto the pier and when I hugged them hello, I marveled again that neither their hair nor their uniforms were wet.

Galexor had insisted on decorating the back of the house just like I had the front, and as we were walking back to the cabin, I noticed both Kzod and Adred staring at the many twinkling lights.

“This is beautiful.”

“It’s for Christmas,” Galexor explained and for the next few minutes while we walked to the house, he explained everything he knew about Christmas to his father and brother, making me smile.

He had even picked movies for later: *It's a Wonderful Life*, *A Christmas Story*, and *Home Alone*, but on top of that list was *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, the original one, and we had decided that he and his family would watch it while I put the finishing touches on our dinner. At first, Galexor hadn't liked that idea, but I told him that it would be rude of us to leave our guests alone while he helped me in the kitchen no matter how much I appreciated the help.

Never had I had more fun preparing a meal than that day while the men chuckled over the Grinch's shenanigans, and I stole a glance here and there. I got so engrossed, I almost burned the green beans.

As if I had planned it that way—which I hadn't, I'm not that good—the food was ready right after the movie ended, and soon we sat around the table Galexor had decorated earlier with Grandma's good china.

"I still can't get over having a tree in the middle of your house," Kzod observed, taking his first bite of turkey.

"It took me a while to get used to it too," Galexor admitted.

"And all those colorful boxes are presents?" Adred asked.

"Yes, and we're not allowed to open them until tomorrow morning," Galexor explained the rules to Adred.

My gaze followed his and a shudder of pleasure ran through me when I remembered that a week ago there had been nothing. I hadn't bothered to buy any presents for myself, and the tree had looked bare. Now though, it looked almost

obscene with the number of wrapped gifts stacked on top of each other.

Not only had Galexor and I gone overboard with buying for each other, we also bought presents for his father and brother, and by the way the men had whispered and vanished into my room earlier, I surmised they had brought presents as well that Galexor helped them wrap.

“This is delicious, just like your baking,” Kzod praised after he swallowed his first bite of turkey.

“Thank you,” I smiled at Kzod.

“You helped make this?” Kzod pointed his fork at Galexor.

I answered in his stead. “He made the bread rolls, the mashed potatoes, and the red cabbage, following my grandma’s recipe.”

Kzod raised an eyebrow at his son. “I’m impressed. Looks like you’re as good with a stove as you are with a blaster.”

“Haha,” Galexor replied, but I could tell his father’s praise pleased him.

I didn’t know if all Scekyns were like Kzod and would allow their sons to follow their dreams, but I knew many human fathers who would have not been pleased for their sons to change profession from spacefarer to baker. Or leave their family to settle on a Class-D planet for a girl he had known for barely over a week. The trust between the three men was nothing short of amazing.

After dinner, we sat down by the coffee table. Galexor put a dish of our cookies and other treats out while I explained Spades to them. Adred and I partnered up, and Galexor partnered with Kzod.

After a few beers—both Kzod and Adred became instantly hooked on it—the game became more competitive. Still, we laughed more than anything else.

Four rounds later—Galexor and Kzod won three—we watched another Christmas movie and called it a night.

Glowing warmly, I laid down in bed next to Galexor with my head on his chest. It had been a long time since I had felt this comfortable and at home.

I remembered how much I had dreaded this Christmas more than anything because it was the first without my grandpa, and I thought about him often during the course of the evening, but not with as much sadness as before or as I thought I would have. For some reason, it felt as if he were here with us. Looking over my shoulder and enjoying my new family as much as me.

“Happy?” Galexor asked, brushing my hair with his fingers.

“Very. And you?”

“This was by far the nicest evening I have ever spent with my family. Thank you for that.”

I lifted my head. “Really?”

He nodded. “Yes, really. We have, of course, spent a lot of time together before, but usually we talk about matters of the

Galactic Union or how a new prototype works or about a new species that entered the Union.”

“You never watched movies or played games?” I knew the question was silly since they didn’t have movies per se, but grandpa and I had watched our fair share of documentaries together and enjoyed them.

“Never,” Galexor confirmed. “We have spirit clubs, kind of like bars, where some games are played, but neither my father nor Adred would ever be caught dead in there. They’re more for simple pilots like me.”

“Even if you weren’t your father’s son, you wouldn’t be a *simple* pilot,” I contradicted, and he grinned.

“Anyway, thank you. I truly enjoyed tonight, and I’m very much looking forward to tomorrow.”



MY PLAN HAD BEEN to get up early and prepare breakfast, but it turned out, I had been more tired than I had realized, and the first lights of the sun already filtered into the room when I finally woke up. Alone.

I grabbed my bathrobe to see what Galexor was up to when I heard a muffled sound coming from the family room. Curious, I left the bedroom and found both Kzod and Adred standing there, in their pajamas and bathrobes—early gifts from Galexor and me—with their blasters in their hands, pointing them in circles through the room.

“What’s going on? Where’s Galexor?”

“Somebody is on the roof,” Adred said with a dark face.

“The roof?”

Kzod nodded. “Does anybody know we’re here?”

“Of course not.” I shook my head.

Just then, a scratching sound came from the fireplace. Deep within the fireplace. Or more precisely, the flue.

“Oh, no.” A dark, foreboding thought entered my mind even before I saw the blackened sack at the bottom of the fireplace. “No, no, no.”

I rushed to the fireplace, which, thankfully and very unusually, wasn't burning. Black soot, however, was raining down the flue.

“Galexor?” I moved to my knees and tried to crane my neck up the fireplace's throat.

“Amber?” came a muffled reply.

“Are you... stuck?” I bit down hard on my lips to stop myself from laughing.

“Is my dad there?”

“Galexor?” Kzod sidled up next to me. “What in the four universes are you doing in there? What is this?”

“Remember the Grinch yesterday?” I asked, “How he got into people's houses?”

“You said that was a cartoon.” Adred joined Kzod and me.

“A little help?” Galexor pleaded.

“We should leave him up there,” Adred grumbled.

“How do we get him out?” Kzod asked with a smile around his usually tightly pressed together lips.

“He probably has a ladder already out there,” I planned out loud. “But we'll need a rope.”

“I know how to get him out,” Adred suggested. “Let’s light a fire, that’ll get him out of there quickly.”

“Adred,” Kzod chided, but with laughter in his voice.

“Are you getting enough air up there?” I tried to ignore the two alien men who were beginning to laugh in earnest.

“I’m okay. I just need to get down or up,” Galexor replied and sneezed, bringing down more soot.

“Alright, let’s do this,” Kzod decided and stomped outside, followed by Adred and me after I assured Galexor that we were on our way to get him out.

In my grandfather’s shed, I found a rope and met the two alien men on the other side of my house. Kzod was already on top of the roof and Adred about midway up the ladder when I called out to him.

“You’ll need this, but please try not to hang him.” I threw the rope up.

He caught it with one hand and nodded before he joined Kzod on top of the roof.

“Thank the gods he had enough sense to lead with his feet,” Kzod yelled down to me and released one end of the rope, while both he and Adred held on to the other.

“You got it, Galexor?” Kzod called.

“Ready,” Galexor yelled up, but it sounded muffled.

I nervously stepped from one foot to the other, pressing my hands against my chest and praying that Galexor would be

okay. Now and then, a small giggle escaped me at the thought that my boyfriend had tried to play Santa. But when I realized he had done so for me, my love for him nearly choked me.

It took a few minutes, but finally I saw a hand grabbing hold of the top of the chimney from inside, and I breathed out a loud exhale of relief.

Soon a very blackened blue alien appeared, and I squealed. “Galexor!”

He waved at me from the top of the roof, while clapping his dad and brother on the shoulders. All three men were laughing so hard that they began to slip. First Kzod, then Adred, who tried to hold on to him, and then Galexor as he tried to stop the other two from falling.

My heart nearly stopped as all three rolled off the roof.

My hand automatically grabbed for my phone to call nine-one-one as my eyes followed the three men sliding and rolling down. Thankfully, into the pile of snow Galexor had accumulated from clearing our driveway over the course of the last few days.

“Galexor! Kzod! Adred! Are you alright?” I hastened to the pile just as three heads came sputtering out of the small snow mountain.

I held my hand out for Galexor to pull him out, but instead he pulled me into the snow pile. Grinning from ear to ear, he gave me a big kiss. “Merry Christmas, sweetheart.”

“Oh, you...” I slapped his arm, but I was too happy he was unhurt to reprimand him.

“Let’s get out of here, and I’ll make some coffee to warm us up,” I said before I remembered that the cold didn’t affect my three aliens at all. “At least I need some hot coffee.”

“Come on Grinch,” Kzod pulled Galexor out and pounded on his back. “You need a shower.”

Galexor looked a bit peevish, but no worse for the wear, as did his father and brother.

I put the finishing touches on breakfast while Galexor took his shower and when he returned, he wore his freshly washed Santa hat and grinned broadly from ear to ear. “Well, I guess that was something that only works in movies.”

“What were you thinking?” I reprimanded. “There’s a reason they put little captions saying *don’t try this at home.*”

“I, for one, enjoyed seeing his ass stuck in the chimney,” Adred said, sipping on his alcohol-free eggnog.

“I wish I could tell the others about this,” Adred remarked wistfully while we ate pancakes and sausages.

“We should have made a holovid,” Kzod added with a crooked grin that reminded me of Galexor.

The men shooed me off when I tried to clean the table after we were done eating and told me to rest in the living room while they made my kitchen more spotless than it had been before.

When they were done, we finally sat around the now lit fireplace, listened to Christmas music, and looked at the Christmas tree, which was surrounded by more presents than it had ever seen, warming me from the inside out.

Kzod was the first to pull a wrapped box out to hand it to me.

“Galexor explained this gift giving to us and helped me wrap this,” he said, looking a bit sheepish, not like the great High Commander he was at all.

“Thank you, you shouldn’t have,” I gushed while my chest expanded with love for Galexor and his family.

“Open it,” Galexor prompted.

Inside, I found a Roomba box, and questioningly, I looked at Kzod.

“I noticed how much you liked our droids, so I had our engineers modify one of your Earthling Roombas. It may look like an Earthling machine, but it has all our technology inside,” Kzod explained.

“Wow!” He was right, the little droid looked exactly like the machines from here. I couldn’t wait to try it out. First though, I rose and hugged Kzod. “Thank you. I have something for you too.”

I dug through the pile of presents until I found the one I was looking for and handed it to Kzod. He reluctantly peeled the wrapping off and stared in fascination at the picture of him, Adred, and Galexor I had pulled from Galexor’s data

processor and printed before framing it with one of the frames we bought in Charming.

“This is... very nice, thank you, Amber.”

I handed a similar present to Adred. “I know I’m not very original, but I thought you might enjoy one too.”

Adred’s frame had little green aliens in the corner and Galexor had assured me his brother would love it. Which, judging by his grin, he did.

“I don’t have a cool gift like my dad’s for you, but I hope you’ll still like it.”

Inside was a smaller version of Galexor’s data processor.

“So you can contact me if my little brother becomes too much of a pest,” Adred laughed.

I didn’t know what to say other than, “Thank you,” and hug him. All my life I had wished for siblings, and it seemed like I had finally found the brother I had been missing for so long.

“You can also access other things, but no Galactic Union secrets I’m afraid. It’s a moderated processor.”

“This is really cool,” I assured him. I had already spent countless hours on Galexor’s data processor, learning about all the other species and cultures in the universe.

“Galexor can also show you how to advertise your goodies on here,” Adred added.

At my questioning glance, Kzod explained, “We’re keeping it kind of hush hush, but our crew loved your cookies. We’ll

figure something out so that it appears as if Galexor is selling them, but I'm sure you will be busy in no time with orders from all around the universe.”

I was floored. Never in my wildest dreams had I expected something like this.

“Which brings me to my presents,” Galexor said.

He walked to where his very soot covered Santa sack still stood by the fireplace to pull out two manilla envelopes. “I know you said you didn't want me to, but if you would consider this my contribution in becoming your partner in *Grandma's Baked Goods*, it would make me very happy.”

He handed me the Christmas decorated manilla envelope, and I opened it with shaking hands. Just as I had suspected, it was the deed to my house. “Galexor.”

He fidgeted nervously, and I realized he was taking a risk here. If I rebuked him, it would be in front of his father and brother, but I was too happy to even contemplate it. “Oh, Galexor, thank you!”

I threw my arms around him, careful of the envelope, and kissed him. “Thank you. You are my Christmas alien miracle.”

“You like it?”

“I love it. I love you.” I kissed him again. “But I will have to pay you back.”

He grinned crookedly and whispered only for me to hear, “I have a few ideas on how.”

I slapped his arm, but he pulled me closer, kissing me until we were both breathless and said, “I love you.”

“How did you pull this off and when?” I asked, still astounded that I, we, wouldn’t have to leave the only place I had ever known as home.

“Remember the day I said I went into Charming?” I nodded. “Well I kind of lied. I went there too, but I also went into the city. It was more inconspicuous to sell my diamonds there. Then I opened a bank account and went back to Charming, where I paid the bank off.”

I had tears in my eyes when I stared at the man who did all that for me. One thing nagged at me though. “How did you open a bank account? You don’t have a driver’s license, social security number...”

“I do, however, have the full force of the Galactic Union’s tech team behind me. Trust me, your human computers are not that hard to hack. Here,” he pulled something from his pants pockets, and I stared at a driver’s license, social security card, and birth certificate. “Galexor Solano,” I read out loud, staring at the birthdate that made him three years older than me.

“Oh, Galexor.” I didn’t know what to say.

“Which brings me to my next gift.”

He pulled something from his other pocket and fell on one knee, making mine go mushy and weak. “Amber McGregor, we only met a couple of weeks ago, but in my heart, I know you are the one, my forever mate. Ever since I met you, I

learned things about myself I didn't know. You have awakened parts in me I would have never discovered without you. That one day away from you was hell. The only reason I didn't come home after an hour was because I needed to do these things, for you, for us."

Tears were falling down my cheeks, and I pressed my hand against my heart to keep it from jumping out of my chest.

"That day though taught me that I never, ever want to be away from you again. So I'm asking you if you would marry me, be my Christmas mate?"

I sank to my knees and hugged him. "Yes. Galexor, yes."

He kissed me so deeply I forgot everything around me until Kzod cleared his throat. With an impish look on his face, Galexor opened the ring box for me, and my breath caught. What was inside had to be a two or three carat diamond. I didn't know much about it, only that it was huge and looked like the princess bloom ring I had admired on one of our trips to Charming.

"Do you like it?"

I pulled it out and stared at it. The stone was so brilliant, it reflected off the lights in so many facets, it took my breath away. "It's stunning."

"You are stunning," he smiled and put the ring on my finger.

"How did you know my size?"

"I may or may not have wound some string around your finger while you slept," he admitted.

I shook my head. “You are more conniving than I gave you credit for, between this and your trip to the city—”

“You have no idea how conniving he can be,” Adred interrupted, and Galexor glared at him.

“But you’ll always have me to keep your *Christmas mate* in line,” Adred laughed.

Kzod and Adred helped Galexor and me to our feet, and the four of us hugged. “I always wanted a sister,” Adred said.

“And I a daughter,” Kzod added.

“And I a father and a brother.” I smiled.

“And I a Christmas mate,” Galexor laughed, but his eyes looked suspiciously moist.



THIS CHRISTMAS TURNED OUT to be the best day of my life. Slowly, we made our way through the mountain of presents, joked, ate, and were... merry. A word I hadn't quite understood until that day.

I even forgot about the other envelope I had for Amber until it was time for lunch and I saw it on the counter.

"I have one more surprise for you," I said, holding the envelope up.

"I don't know," she shook her head. "I had so many surprises today, I'm not sure I can take another without thinking I died and went to heaven."

"You'll love it, trust me," I said and felt my heartbeat quicken as I handed it to her.

So far, we had been planning things together, and I wasn't sure if I had gone overboard in my last purchase.

"We can sell it and buy something else if you don't like it," I said, watching her open the envelope.

She pulled out the deed to a bakery in Charming. I met Fred, the owner, at the bank when I paid off Amber's loan. He said he had made so much money in Charming that he and his wife were ready to retire to a place called Florida, but first he needed to sell his bakery to pay for their dream home. One thing had led to another, and soon I was out another one point five million dollars but the proud owner of Freddy's.

"I put the deed in both our names and set things in motion to have the name changed to *Grandma's Baked Goods*, if you like it," I said in a voice that sounded so insecure it couldn't have possibly belonged to me.

"You bought Freddy's?" Amber asked, aghast.

"Is that bad?" Now I was really becoming insecure.

She laughed. "No. It's not bad." She laughed louder. "It's... you have no idea. I always loved that place. It's been around since I was a kid."

"I saw the kitchen. It's a lot larger than yours, and they have six ovens. Six!"

"Oh, Galexor!" She slung her arms around me. "This is... I don't know what to say."

"Say you like it."

"I love it."

Before I could say another word, a knock on the front door interrupted us.

“I’ll get rid of whoever it is, but just in case, you guys might want to camouflage,” Amber advised.

I had talked to my father and Adred about the possibility of going to town or having someone come over, so both activated their transformation devices to alter their skin tone and appear more human.

“Hi, Nora,” I heard Amber say.

“Hey, Amber. My mom sent me. She thought you might get lonely all by yourself here, with... your grandpa gone. She wanted to know if you want to join us.”

“Oh that is so sweet of you guys,” Amber gushed. “But I’m not alone. Come in. See, this is Galexor, my... fiancé. He just proposed, and his brother, Adred, and his father, Kzod.”

“Oh my gosh, that is the most beautiful ring ever, Amber. I’m so happy for you,” Nora gushed.

“Everybody, this is my friend Nora. She and her mom live right across the lake. We’ve been friends since kindergarten,” Amber explained.

“I’ll go back to my house. I don’t want to intrude,” Nora said, looking at my brother from below her eyelashes.

Adred’s interested glance in her direction didn’t escape me either. “Why don’t you and your mom join us if it’s just the two of you?” I suggested, catching Amber’s eyes and hoping I wasn’t overstepping.

“We could not poss—” Nora began, but Amber interrupted her.

“Oh that’s a great idea! We have so much food. And we were just about to eat lunch and watch a movie. I know you and your mom love watching Christmas movies.”

Nora’s lips turned into a smile, but she was only looking at Adred. “If you don’t mind.”

“Not at all,” Adred said before I could.

“Okay, I’ll just drive my boat back and get my mom.” Nora turned to the door.

“Boat?” Adred asked.

“Nora and her mom live across the lake,” Amber explained. “We always visit each other by boat.”

“Is that safe?” Adred looked skeptical.

“Why don’t you go with her to make sure?” I suggested.

Amber seemed to like that idea. “Yes, Adred has never been on a boat or a lake, he’ll love it.”

“You’ll need some warmer clothes,” Nora cautioned.

“He can take my jacket,” I offered and grabbed it off the hook.

Amber, my father, and I walked the pair to the pier where a small boat bobbed, anchored on the water. Amber boxed me in the side and grinned up at me when I turned to her. She winked. “Nora is my best friend. She and her mother have been alone for a long time.” She nodded meaningfully at my dad.

“Maybe Dad and Adred will find their own Christmas mates,” I suggested in a low whisper.

“Wouldn’t that be wonderful?”

I wasn’t sure. I didn’t think my father or Adred were the type to settle down on Earth like me, then again, I had never thought of myself as the type either. The idea, though, warmed me.

“I love you, Amber.”

“I love you too, Galexor.”



EPILOGUE

THAT WAS LAST YEAR. Much has happened since. Galexor and I married in the summer, right before the tourist season began, and I have never been happier.

Our bakery in Charming was a hit and our online store even more so. I'm not exaggerating, but it's Galexor and I who keep our post office in business. We already hired five people and have to turn orders away.

Galexor and I talked about expanding our business. We could have bought the store next door when it went up for sale, but we're happy the way things are. We don't want to get bigger. Financially, we'll always be secure thanks to his father, who gave us even more diamonds before he left, promising he and Adred would be back for the wedding and next year's Christmas.

Even if it weren't for that, our business is doing well enough to support us and pay for all the little additions Galexor made to our cabin.

It turned out that he isn't just a good baker, he is also very good at building things.

He added two bedrooms and an office to the cabin, so we have plenty of room for any guests coming to visit, and next he will be working on our nursery.

Yes, I'm pregnant, wondering if life could possibly get any better.

The only worry we have is the baby's skin color. Galexor and the others can camouflage whenever they're in town, but this would be very hard for a baby, especially right after I've given birth.

Thankfully, Stella, Nora's mom, is a nurse and has promised to be by my side when the baby comes, which won't be here on Earth, but on Kzod's flagship. I'm not sure how he has pulled off staying here for this long, but thankfully he did.

His medical team there is also working on something to change their blue skin tone permanently, or at least for longer periods of time so the aliens don't have to use the camouflage device every time a member of Galexor's family or any of the other members of the Galactic Union come to visit.

Oh, I forgot to mention that part. I guess Grandma's cookies were such a hit that Earth, Charming in particular, has become *the* travel destination for members of the Galactic Union. Of

course, they have to keep this from the other humans, who have no idea who is roaming in their midst. But Charming has been booming even more ever since. And it's considered something like an adventure vacation.

I'm not sure how I feel about Charming being the buzz of alien visitation even though nobody knows about it, but I'm happy Galexor isn't the only alien around here.

Life is good, and I can hardly wait for our next Christmas together as one big happy family and to hear from Nora about all the adventures she and her mom have been part of.

When Galexor and I are not busy baking, we've been decorating the cabin just the way we want it, putting some of Grampa's things on shelves to make it easier for me to part with others. Like Ol' Nelly.

She's still around, but I'm only allowed to drive her into town during the day and in the summer. For all the other trips, we use Galexor's truck. It's probably not that surprising that Galexor picked the biggest, most obnoxious looking truck he could find, but I do have to admit that all the safety features are nice, especially with a baby on the way.

Some days, I hardly recognize my old cabin any longer, then, on other days, it looks like nothing has changed. Probably because when we bought new couches, we kept them in the same colors as the old one had been.

Grampa's recliner is still there too, in a corner, unused, with its small round table sitting next to it with Grampa's old pipe

on top. Some days I feel like I see him sitting in it, grinning from ear to ear and congratulating me on my new life.

His old room, however, is hardly recognizable. Galexor even added a walk-in closet that's almost bigger than the nursery. It turned out that my new husband is quite the clothing snob.

After wearing the same uniform all his life, it's probably not too surprising that he takes up more closet space than me, but I don't begrudge him an inch.

I love how every morning begins and ends with *I love you*.

THE END

I hope you enjoyed this alien Christmas story. If you have a minute, I would love for you to leave a quick review on Amazon to help others decide on the title as well.

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