

A VERY TENTACULAR CHRISTMAS



A TENTACULAR
TALES
NOVELLA

Chloe Archer

A VERY TENTACULAR CHRISTMAS

TENTACULAR TALES

BOOK 1.5

CHLOE ARCHER

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A VERY TENTACULAR CHRISTMAS (Tentacular Tales 1.5)

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A VERY TENTACULAR CHRISTMAS

RIVER

Ho, ho, ho...and tentacles? I've written a super secret Christmas novella in my over-the-top space saga/tentacle romance series. Who could have imagined I'd have so many *actual* alien fans across the universe? I can't wait to share this new story with them, but first I need some feedback I can trust. Who better to ask than my alien boo, and mega fan, Kai? So naturally, I plan an ultra festive Christmas-themed date night to get Kai in a festive mood to listen to my story. There will be cookies, cocoa, and hopefully plenty of sexy times. But as they often say about the best-laid plans of aliens and men...

KAI

I'm learning that when it's River's turn to plan our date nights, I have to be prepared for almost anything. Coming home to find my house looking like the set of a Hallmark Christmas movie exploded in my living room was not what I was expecting—especially in October! But once River brings out the sugar cookies and cocoa, I'm on board. He knows the way to my two hearts. However, when I'm getting in more than just the Christmas mood, trouble arrives in the form of River's Uncle Benji, my brother, my mother, and my father. My inner grump may go full grinch if they don't leave us—and my precious sugar cookies—alone!

A Very Tentacular Christmas (Tentacular Tales 1.5) is a 32,000 word novella that takes place between Books 1 and 2 in the series. It features more in the adventures of Captain Starblade and Lord Vardox who are trapped on a winter moon during a

snowstorm and there's only one bed (!), the unexpected arrival of meddling family members at the *worst* possible moment, sexy Santa lingerie, bells on balls, an unintentionally erotic sculpture, and plenty of Christmas cheer!

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CHAPTER ONE



KAI

Before I can even get my key in the lock of my front door, it swings open to reveal my ‘mostly’ human boyfriend, River, lounging in the doorway—looking utterly adorable, but perplexingly out of season.

“What in the heavenly cosmos are you wearing?”

He beams at me. “I wanted to get a little festive for our date tonight.”

That...doesn’t sound good. I take a wary step back. “And why would you need to get ‘festive’? I thought we were going to have a quiet evening in?”

Yes, it’s Friday night, but it’s also been a very long week. After dealing with the Groxil supplying sketchy drugs to aliens on Earth, we’ve hit a dead end in our investigation. Wilder is in the wind and his employer is just as much of a mystery to us as before. Cutting off the drug supply seems to have put a temporary stop to dangerous events at least. That doesn’t mean I haven’t been tracking down every single lead I can in the meantime. We’ve been re-interviewing aliens affected by the drugs and revisiting critical locations, but so far we’ve turned up very little. I’ve been putting in a lot of overtime and tonight I just want to relax. I’m not sure if I’m up to whatever River has planned for us. He likes to spring these things on me as ‘fun’ surprises. Lately, he’s been very...creative with these date nights.

Being River's boyfriend is never boring, but I'll admit his boundless energy can be daunting. To be fair, I usually end up having a good time regardless of whatever he coaxes me into doing. But I know I'm a bit of a curmudgeon when it comes to having fun. I'm not in my twilight years yet, far from it considering how long my people live, but every now and then the thirteen year age gap between me and River feels all too real. At thirty-five, I do *not* enjoy going out on a Friday night, especially when I've had a long, busy week. I just want to go home and relax with my boyfriend.

I count my lucky stars that River isn't like his best friend Evan, who seems to want to go out and party just about every night. For many reasons, I am grateful that River is a sci-fi nerd who prefers geeky pursuits like watching movie marathons and playing board games. This does, of course, mean he expects me to watch movies and play games with him. But I suppose that's better than being dragged out to a noisy club.

River's eyes are sparkling. "My sexy-grumpy boo shouldn't underestimate me. I saw how exhausted you've been all week, so I organized our super fun date night right here at your house."

Okay, that actually sounds pretty nice. But his attire has me questioning...many things. I stare down at his shirt, which features a small Christmas elf pointing his naked bum at me and sparkly red lettering that proclaims he's 'Santa's Cheeky Little Helper.' My gaze travels up to the red Santa's hat on top of River's head. I arch an eyebrow. "You do realize it's the first week of October, right? I know you humans like to begin celebrating Christmas months ahead of time, but I think you might be more than a tad bit premature."

River puts his hands on his hips and shakes his head at me, the white fluffy pom-pom on the end of his hat bouncing. "It's all about setting the mood and creating a festive Christmas spirit!"

I frown. "Before Halloween?"

He scoffs. “Look, I have a whole thing planned tonight and I need your help, so you’ve got to get into the spirit of things!” He grabs my arm and pulls me through the door. I follow him, not knowing what to expect. My mouth drops open when I get my first look at my living room. It’s like a cheesy Hallmark Christmas movie exploded in here.

Ahem. Not that I’d know anything about those films.

There’s garland everywhere—around the archway, the windows, and the mantle of my fireplace, the latter of which is also sporting several colorful knit stockings hung in a row. A fake tree stands in the room’s corner with myriad glittering decorations, a sea of silver and gold tinsel, and rows upon rows of blinking rainbow lights adorning it. The thing is damn near blinding. Artfully arranged over the back of my oversized gray couch is a bright red throw patterned with white snowflakes. On my coffee table, which is blanketed with white ‘snow’ batting, there are several candles framed with little wreath-shaped holders all lined up in a row.

I blink several times as I take in the stupefying spectacle. “So, why exactly are we celebrating Christmas in October?”

River bounces on his toes, looking like he might burst from the sheer amount of excitement contained within his small body. The sight melts both of my hearts, and I know in that instant I will go along with whatever he wants to do tonight.

My total opposite, River truly knows how to live life to the fullest. Even if his enthusiasm is overzealous at times, it’s become something I find charming and even inspiring. He’s definitely one of a kind—and every day I’m even more grateful he’s all mine.

“Before I tell you more, you have to put this on.” From behind his back, River pulls out another red Santa hat complete with white fuzzy pom-pom on the end.

I stare at it. “Is this some kinky sex thing you haven’t told me about?”

He snorts. “Nah, of course not. Although, there will be sexy times later, but they won’t require the Santa hats.” He pauses, considering. “Well, probably not.”

I take the red fabric from him and hold it between my fingers like a dead fish. “Then why do I need to wear this piece of foolish costumery?”

He smacks my arm playfully. “Because it makes things so much more fun! And it’s on theme. Tonight—drum roll, please—I’m going to treat you to the preliminary draft of my Tentacular Tales super-secret spin-off Christmas novella!”

For once, I can’t contain my gasp of excitement as my hearts race. “A secret Christmas novella? You didn’t tell me about this.”

The smug smirk he aims in my direction is beyond adorable. “Then it wouldn’t have been super-secret and awesome, now would it?”

I roll my eyes but smile back at him. I do that a lot these days when I’m with River. “Honestly, I can’t believe you were able to hide this from me. You’re a terrible actor.”

He throws his head back and laughs. “I know! That’s why I’ve only been working on it when I’m at home instead of when I’m staying at your place.”

I glance down at the red hat in my hand. “I *have* to wear this in order to participate in tonight’s events?”

“Of course! I know it’s early, but try to find and embrace your inner Christmas cheer to help me with my story. I still need to revise and edit some stuff before I release it closer to the season. But since you are my number one trusted alpha *and* beta reader, I want your input.”

I can’t lie. I’m deeply honored and touched at this moment. As a longtime, albeit covert, fan of River’s story, I am always amazed at his creative talent. That he wants *my* input on his story speaks volumes about how much he trusts me and my opinion.

I put the hat on my head and cross my arms, giving him my most serious face because I am *not* getting misty eyed,

dammit. “I am now properly adorned. Let the storytelling commence.”

River bursts out laughing. “Oh my freaking god! You’re so cute.”

Before I can say anything, he whips out his phone and snaps a picture of me.

“Hey!”

He clutches his phone to his chest. “Memories, sweet memories. Gotta document them all.”

I groan.

River cocks a hip, his posture full of sass. “Don’t even front. You like my quirky, oddball ideas and shenanigans.”

I lean in and kiss him on his pert little nose. “Yes, yes dear. Tell me what the agenda is this evening.”

River brightens again and grabs my wrist, pulling me toward my bedroom. “Okay, first you’re gonna get into some comfy non-work clothes, because wearing a suit for this would be a mood killer. I know you already ate dinner at the office— *but* I’ve made some Christmas cookies for dessert. We’ll have them with some hot cocoa and marshmallows.”

With these last few words, my eyes widen and my hearts pound with renewed excitement. “Cookies,” I whisper as I swallow back some drool, “and hot cocoa with marshmallows?”

River grins. “That’s right. Just for you, boo.”

Dark matter and dammit. My boyfriend has realized how severe my sweet tooth is and is already using it to his advantage. But I can’t complain. Already, I’m salivating at the prospect of cookies and cocoa.

I swallow. “So, where does the story fit in?”

“I’ll start reading it to you while we enjoy our dessert. After all, I’ll only have one cookie with my cocoa.”

Inside, I crow with victory. That means the rest are all mine! Even my tentacles do a happy little shimmy inside me. I

lower my voice and wrap my arms around him before I nuzzle his ear. “I think this date just got a whole lot more interesting.”

River snorts again and pulls away. “Go get changed, Cookie Casanova.”

I salute him and head toward my bedroom. He hollers after me, “Don’t forget you still need to wear the hat!”

Damn.

A short time later, we’re seated on my couch in front of the television, which is now displaying the scenery of a crackling fire in the background. We snuggle under the throw blanket with our two steaming mugs of cocoa. River’s enormous platter with two dozen frosted sugar cookies sits on my coffee table within easy reach.

River leans his back against the arm of the couch and extends his legs out so his feet rest in my lap while he perches his laptop on his thighs. “Are you ready?” The slight arch of his eyebrow is challenging.

I set my cocoa down and take one of his feet in my hands. Slowly, I massage it, pressing my fingers into his pressure points with skill. My tentacles vibrate with satisfaction as his eyes roll back in his head and he moans.

“With you, I’m ready for anything.”

River shakes his head, amusement written all over his face. “I love you, you big tentacled goofball. Now, let me set the stage. Lord Vardox and Captain Starblade have put aside their differences temporarily to celebrate Christmas together while they’re both trapped on the wintry Moon of Caldikkar.

I pick up his other foot and knead the arch with my thumbs, eliciting another moan of pleasure. “How did they end up on this moon?”

River waves a hand dismissively. “It’s neither here nor there. They were both hoping to cash in on some reported goods for sale, only to find out their intel had been a bunch of baloney. And now the weather has taken a turn for the worst. Their scouting vessels cannot depart from the moon until the storm passes and the skies clear.”

“Let me guess. They get stuck somewhere that only has one bed and they have to share it for the night?”

River gives me a single finger gun salute. “Bingo!”

Now I arch an eyebrow. “Don’t you think that’s a little predictable? Also, that trope is on the overdone side, especially with holiday stories.”

He gasps in mock outrage. “How dare you, sir! The one bed trope is an evergreen trope for a reason. It will *never* go out of style. It will *always* be a classic with readers.” I shrug and he narrows his eyes. “Don’t even pretend you don’t love the one bed trope because I know you do, and I bet you were waiting with bated breath for a scenario forcing Starblade and Vardox into this very situation.”

I try but fail to keep my face impassive and he grins in triumph.

“Fine,” I admit, “you’re right.”

“The one bed trope may be overused, but it’s still much beloved for a reason. A whole hell of a lot of reasons, in fact. Anyway, are you ready to listen to this or not?”

I squeeze his foot. In my best attempt at a British accent, I say, “Make it so.”

River inhales sharply, eyes flaring with lust. “You sexy son of a bitch. You’re just gonna whip out that Jean-Luc Picard hotness on me right before I start my story? Where the fuck have you been hiding that when we’re in bed together?”

It’s my turn to smirk. “I’ve been saving it for a special occasion.”

With one free hand, River reaches down to adjust himself in his pants. “Fucking hell. You’re giving me a chubby. Save that for when we practice what Lord Vardox and Captain Starblade get down to in this story later.”

My tentacles perk up. They like the sound of that.

River clears his throat after giving me a warning glance, before he looks down at his laptop and begins.

Chapter One (Captain Starblade)

Shaking the snow off his jacket, Captain Starblade strode into the one inn on this godforsaken winter moon he found himself on that residents claimed still had vacancies. Outside, the small starport was fast being blanketed in a sea of snow. As Starblade traveled from one end of the town to the other, he became more and more worried. The powerful wind whipped about with furious frenzy, causing drifts and near white out conditions. Starblade had tried to find shelter at every viable establishment he found, but to no avail. Accommodation options were disappearing faster than Starblade could make his way to a new establishment to inquire. By the time he'd learned about this last inn on the edge of town, he had to wade there in snow up to his knees.

There was no way he'd be departing the Moon of Caldikkar any time soon. The shipyard where his scouting vessel remained docked had closed down. All the staff had left their posts to seek shelter. Apparently, one did not take winter storms cavalierly on this miserable rock. Now he understood why.

"Damn and blast," he muttered to himself. He should have known it was too good to be true when he'd received intel that a merchant on this moon was selling large quantities of the highly prized but elusive Tashrock ore he'd been commissioned to find. His employer would not be pleased, especially since he'd only provide payment upon delivery.

Running an ice-cold hand through his snow covered hair and down his face, Starblade got his bearings and scanned the inn's entryway. It was nothing fancy, but appeared to be clean and well-tended. He'd certainly stayed in far shadier establishments in his time. Thankfully, the inn was warm and cozy. The building included a connected tavern off to the left-hand side of the main entrance. Starblade salivated at the tantalizing aromas of hot

cooked food, and reveled in the heat emanating from a cavernous fireplace. His stomach rumbled. Chilled to the bone, he looked forward to getting into some dry clothes and enjoying a meal in front of that fire soon.

Straight ahead, he spied a front desk staffed by a small, elderly Nezelon woman. As he strode forward, visions of a cozy bed and bath awaiting him, his gait faltered when he noticed the wide back of a tall man who stood at the desk several paces ahead of him. From behind, he looked strangely familiar. With a sinking sensation, Starblade realized why.

As if seeming to sense his gaze, the man turned around and regarded him with a knowing smirk and stupidly attractive, stormy gray eyes.

“Why, my dear Captain. I did not know you were in town. What a delightful pleasure!”

Starblade narrowed his eyes at Lord Loki Fucking Vardox. His far too tempting tentacled nemesis. “What the hell are you doing here?”

Vardox arched one perfectly sculpted dark eyebrow in response. “I’m getting a room to escape the storm outside.” He shook his head in disappointment and shrugged with an air of unconcern. “It seems I’m stuck here for the time being, so I suppose I shall just have to make the best of it.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Starblade hitched his damp rucksack up on his shoulder, crossed his arms, and scowled.

“Now, now, Captain. No need to be so vulgar and hostile.”

“I find it far from coincidental that you are on this frozen tundra of a backwater moon at the exact same time that I am.”

Vardox’s mouth twitched with amusement and he leaned against the front desk where the elderly innkeeper was looking back and forth between them

with wide-eyed uncertainty. "I received some faulty intelligence that someone in this starport was selling Tashrock ore, but it appears they were mistaken."

Starblade fumed. "It's bad enough you're stalking me. Now you're trying to steal my damn jobs out from under me?"

Vardox's expression was all mock innocence. "Whatever do you mean, my sweet captain? Have you forgotten that we work for employers who operate in a free-trade intergalactic market? The buyer who contacted me was open about the fact he'd hired several people for the job but would only pay those who brought him the ore. First come, first serve and all that jazz, darling."

Starblade narrowed his eyes. It was no use trying to argue with a villain like Vardox. Besides, Starblade was too cold and tired to bother. "Whatever." He huffed and strode forward, shoving past his nemesis to stand before the startled, wizened little woman behind the counter. "Excuse me, ma'am. I'd like to rent a room for the night, and possibly for the next little while. At least until this storm passes. My ship won't be able to take off in these conditions."

The little innkeeper wrung her hands with concern. "I'm so sorry, sir. But I just gave away our last room to the gentleman who was in line before you."

Starblade slowly turned his head toward a now grinning Lord Vardox. He narrowed his eyes in response and turned back to the innkeeper. "Surely you have somewhere I could stay for the night? I'm fine with sleeping on the floor by the fireplace in the tavern if necessary."

"Oh, I'm afraid that would go against health code violations, dear." The woman wrung her hands again. "Whatever shall we do?"

Starblade gritted his teeth and let out a frustrated sigh. "All the other inns and guesthouses in town are

full up right now. I just spent twenty minutes wading through snow up to my knees trying to get here. I'm afraid you're my only hope. If I can't stay here, I'm going to catch my death outside."

The elderly woman looked distraught now. "Oh dear!"

"If I may be so bold," Lord Vardox drawled, inserting himself into the conversation. "I'm more than willing to share my room with this...gentleman."

The innkeeper rallied and clapped her hands together with enthusiasm. "Why, that's a wonderful idea, sir! And so very kind and generous of you." She beamed at Starblade. "See! We have a solution to the problem, after all."

Starblade wanted to protest. He did. But he was also no fool. He had no other options at this point. It seemed he could either freeze his balls off outside and die of hypothermia, or he would have to endure sharing a room with Vardox.

Biting back a curse, he turned to his 'roommate'. "The gentleman is indeed most gracious. I thank you for your kindness, sir," he ground out.

Vardox looked politely amused as he dangled the key to the room in front of him. "Well, that's settled then. If you'd be so good as to follow me upstairs, we can make ourselves more...comfortable."

Starblade's hackles raised at that. He had a damn good idea of what Lord Vardox wanted to get up to with him tonight, but Starblade would worry about that later. Already, he was shivering from the dampness that had seeped into his clothing and his very bones. He needed to get warm and dry, and then get some hot food into his belly.

Giving Vardox a stilted bow, he gestured at him to lead the way. Starblade wasn't sure if it was supreme confidence or some odd trust that enabled Vardox to

turn his back on him and lead the way. Either way, Starblade knew sharing a room with this man was going to be far from simple.

CHAPTER TWO



RIVER

“Oh. My. Galactic. Gods!” Kai interrupts, moaning like a fucking porn star.

I take my eyes off my laptop screen to behold my boyfriend, who is in the middle of having a foodgasm over one of the frosted sugar cookies I made him.

Now, to be fair, I did plan this somewhat deliberately. Those in his inner circle know all about Kai’s sweet tooth. And it is a fun weak point of his I like to manipulate every now and again. The whole time I was making sugar cookies for him, and coating them in way too much frosting and sprinkles, I was eagerly anticipating his reaction. Personally, I found the cookies too sweet and capable of sending me into a sugar coma if I ate more than one. But for Kai, they may as well be manna from heaven sending him into raptures. He’s already on his third cookie, and the noises that he’s been making are seriously distracting. Now I’m practically drooling as I watch him moaning around a mouthful of my cookie and wishing it was my cock. Also, licking frosting off one’s fingers should not be sexy, but Kai manages to make it so.

Perhaps I didn’t consider all the ramifications of Operation Sugar Cookie Seduction as well as I should have. He’s the one seducing *me* right now!

Wait, maybe I’m into that.

I leer and wiggle one of my reindeer sock-covered feet in his lap. “You like them?”

He whips his head in my direction and gives me a heavy lidded, sultry gaze that has my cock perking up in my way too tight jeans. Dammit! I knew I should have worn sweatpants, but I wanted to wear the jeans that make my ass look fabulous.

“They are delicious,” Kai murmurs, his voice going deep and husky in a way that sends my heart racing and all the blood rushing from my brain to my poor confined cock. His expression is all seriousness, but the smear of frosting he’s got on his cheek makes him look like a big kid. “We should not relegate sugar cookies to Christmas holidays only,” he tells me. “Indeed, I think they are a delicacy we should enjoy all year long.” He gives me hopeful puppy dog eyes. “You’ll make them for me again, won’t you?”

He is so freaking adorable! Way to just tentacle fuck me right in the feels, why don’t you? I cannot even with this man. He’s so fucking precious to me. And I’m so glad that he’s *all* mine.

I lick my lips like a sexy pro. “Boo, I will make you all the sugar cookies you could ever want, always and forever.”

He grins, his eyes shining bright like a kid at Christmas, that smear of pink frosting at the corner of his mouth totally slaying me. Already, my mind is whirling with ideas. It’s clear that desert gets my man in the mood. I need to find more opportunities to explore that with him...

I reach out and wipe the frosting from his mouth before licking it off my finger. Kai watches me intently the whole time. *Oh, he likes that, does he?* I file that new tidbit away as well. “I’m glad you’re having such an enjoyable foodgasm over the cookies right now. But what do you think of the story so far?”

Kai takes a sip of his hot cocoa, smacking his lips with relish. “Well, I’m intrigued already. This is the first time you’ve written from Starblade’s point of view.”

I tilt my head at him. “Is it? That can’t be right.”

He gives me his own version of a ‘bitch, please’ look. “I know the story *very* well. While it is technically in third

person, you write it more obviously from Vardox's limited perspective, which is kind of ironic given the title of the story."

Sonofabitch! Now that he mentions it, I remember someone pointing this very issue out to me at the first writer critique group I ever attended a few years ago. Of course, I took the suggestion to heart, but was convinced I'd get to Starblade's perspective one day and that it wouldn't be an issue. But as time went by, I guess I sort of forgot. Kai is totally fucking right.

I frown. "Shit. You're right. I do tell the story more from Vardox's perspective. He's just so damn charismatic though! Getting into his headspace is easy for me, and he's so much fun to play around with. I've given poor Starblade short shrift." I bite my lip. "Maybe I should change this story? It's actually going to alternate between Starblade and Vardox's POVs. What if readers don't like that?"

Kai massages one of my feet again, and I turn to jelly at the relaxing and soothing sensation. My man is good with his hands—among other appendages!

"Your readers are going to love it. I'm sure they'll be thrilled to get both characters' POVs. Besides, it's not like your readers have complained about how you write the story, right?"

"Not much," I mumble. I have gotten the occasional message asking me for Starblade's POV, but most people seem content to have Vardox be at the center of the narrative.

"Seriously," Kai continues in a soft and encouraging tone, "this special Christmas novella will be a real treat for them. You can use it to test the waters and assess how people respond. Do they want more of Starblade's POV? Do they like this use of alternating perspectives? You can use your story to do some market research."

I snort and take hold of his free hand, linking our fingers together. "You're too fucking sweet. I'm not even charging people for this story. It's completely free to anyone with an Internet connection, just like the rest of the series."

Kai frowns as he moves to massage my other foot. “Hmmm. I see why it would be problematic to change to a paid platform after all this time, but have you considered maybe opening up a membership or subscription to the story? Or a platform where readers could give occasional donations or tips for you as the creator? Your story is worth paying for.”

I stare at him, uncertainty churning in my gut. “You think people would want to contribute?”

He chuckles. “Darling, you underestimate your own talents if you think readers won’t support you. I can’t speak for your human readers, but I know plenty of extraterrestrials who’d be more than willing to support your work monetarily.”

The idea is mind blowing. “That would be amazing.”

Kai gets an excited glint in his purple eyes. “I could help you set it up.”

Dammit! Now I’m getting all choked up. My heart is full to bursting with all the feels for this amazing man. “You’d do that for me?”

Kai moves my feet out of his lap and scoots closer to me before pulling me into his arms. “I would do just about anything for you, River Sullivan.”

Before I can stop it, my brain goes to that Meatloaf song, “I would do anything for love...but I won’t do that,” and I want to ask him about what he wouldn’t do for me. Because now, I’m seriously wondering. But before I can even open my mouth, that smooth ass motherfucker lays the whammy of all sexy kisses on me. Swoon!

He devours my mouth, licking, nibbling, and sucking with as much enthusiasm as he did his sugar cookies. Fucking hell, that’s *hot*.

When Kai pulls back with a devilish grin, I’m panting and super fucking uncomfortable. Curse these tight jeans!

“You realize you’re distracting me, right?” My voice totally wasn’t breathy when I said that.

“But I enjoy distracting you. In fact, I think it should be one of my duties as your boyfriend.”

I feign an air of tragic sorrow. “I see. You don’t want to listen to my story after all...”

Kai gets a panicked look in his eyes. “I never said that!”

I sigh forlornly. “And we hadn’t even gotten to the hottest part of the story yet. Such a shame.”

Kai tightens his hold on me and peppers kisses down the side of my neck in all the spots that turn me into putty in his talented hands. “Come on. You know you want to read me more. I’ll behave.”

“Well...,” I hedge, trying not to shiver from his ministrations.

“Pretty please with sugar cookies on top?”

Fuck me. He is too damn cute and has learned way too many of *my* weaknesses.

“Ahem. Well. Okay, then. Now, as I told you before, Captain Starblade and Lord Vardox are going to set aside their differences to enjoy a Christmas evening together.”

Kai tilts his head, considering. “What makes Starblade willing to go along with this plan? I can see Vardox jumping on it in a heartbeat, but Starblade?”

I waggle an eyebrow at him. “Why don’t you sit back and relax, and you’ll find out.”

He salutes me with a cocky smirk. “Aye, aye, sir.”

I growl. “Quit being so fucking sexy and let me keep reading the story, dammit!” I give him one last mock glare before grabbing my laptop and turning my attention back to my screen as Kai cradles me in his arms.

Chapter Two (Lord Vardox)

Lord Loki Vardox opened the door to his room and strode inside, failing to keep the delighted grin off his

face. The innkeeper had given him her last room, and it was indeed, most cozy, just as she had intimated.

His sweet captain trailed in behind him and came to a sudden stop, freezing like the proverbial nitwit caught in a ship's tractor beam. He whipped his head in Vardox's direction, outrage written all over his ruggedly handsome but pale features. "There's only one damn bed!"

Vardox gave an elegant shrug. "I'm afraid this was all there was on offer, my dear captain. Besides, it's not as if we haven't shared a bed together before. No need to be missish with me now."

Starblade crossed his arms. "I want to make it perfectly clear that I have no intention of sharing a bed with you tonight or ever again."

Vardox 'tsked' and shook his head sadly. "We both know that's not true."

Starblade huffed.

Vardox raised a conciliatory hand. "Your tenacity in resisting me does you justice, darling. I know how strong-spirited you are. It's one of many things I find so attractive about you. But I'm afraid it's either sleeping with me or sleeping on the cold, hard floor. Take it or leave it."

"You're evil," Starblade hissed between chattering teeth.

Vardox's gaze sharpened as he inspected his dear captain up close. The poor man was more than a little bedraggled. His damp clothing clung to his skin, making him shiver uncontrollably. In fact, now that Vardox observed him more closely, he realized that Starblade's lips were looking nearly blue and his naturally sun-kissed skin was going a ghastly gray hue.

As much as Vardox would love to sit here and exchange banter with the captain, he had a much

stronger—and somewhat unwanted—impulse to take care of him.

That gave him pause. Vardox was not what anyone would call a particularly caring or nurturing man by nature. But there was just something about Captain Tiberius Starblade that made Vardox feel things he had never experienced or known before. He didn't like to think about or examine these feelings too closely. Instead, he operated on instinct. It had always served him well.

Closing the door behind him, he took hold of Starblade's arm. "Come with me, Captain. We'll sort out our sleeping arrangements later. For now, you need a good hot bath to warm you. You're chilled to the bone. And I know you too tender-skinned humans are such a delicate species; you can catch cold and die far too easily. We must ensure we keep you in good health."

Even if Starblade had wanted to protest, he could not. The man was shivering violently, his teeth chattering in the silence. Vardox led him into the small bathing chamber and turned on the hot water for the bathing tub. He thanked his celestial stars that this inn was equipped with such amenities. Given they were in such a small backwater spaceport, he had not been certain of what he would find in an establishment such as this one. But he was pleasantly surprised. Although rather rustic and quite dated, the room and the bathing chamber were clean and hospitable.

Within moments, piping hot water filled the tub. Vardox tested the temperature and adjusted it. After all, he did not want to scald his poor captain, but he needed to get him warm—and fast.

When Vardox turned back to him, Starblade stood trembling, expression dazed and uncertain. For the first time in a long time, Vardox felt concern—worry, even. His brow furrowed. "Are you quite all right?"

In response, Starblade's eyes rolled into the back of his head and he collapsed like a limp rag doll. Instinctually, Vardox's tentacles whipped out with unerring speed to catch the captain before he fell to the floor. Tenderly cradling him in his red hued appendages, Vardox pulled Starblade close, frowning down at him with mounting anxiety.

Reaching out a hand, he caressed Starblade's cool, pale cheek but got no response. With no time to worry about consent—after all, this had turned into something of an emergency—Vardox disrobed the captain with swift, perfunctory movements. It was one of Vardox's many talents. The damp material gave him some difficulty, but in the end, he freed the captain from its cold, soggy constraints, and settled him into the steaming water.

Vardox kneeled by the side of the tub and used the large ladle provided to pour hot water over the captain's flesh. He was relieved to see his efforts having a positive effect after several long minutes. The captain's pale, almost gray-hued skin, pinked up in the hot water, and soon his eyelids fluttered. With a groan he opened his stunning blue eyes to stare into Vardox's own. He blinked in confusion. "What? What happened?"

When he realized he was naked in the bath, he struggled to leave the water. Vardox placed a firm hand and two tentacles in the center of his chest, keeping him right where he was. "Now, now, my dear captain. I'm afraid you took a bit of turn a moment ago. Your core temperature was too low, I suspect."

Starblade's stomach chose that moment to emit a vociferous rumble.

Vardox chuckled with amusement. "And it would seem that you haven't eaten in quite some time. That combination made you temporarily lose consciousness. Never fear, though. You have remained unmolested during your spell. I may be a villain. I may even be

detestable to you. But I am not one to take liberties from an unconscious partner. I derive no pleasure in such disgusting and appalling behavior.” He leered. “I much prefer willing and submissive companions who are fully on board with all the things I plan to do to them.”

Starblade swallowed audibly but said nothing.

Vardox rose to his feet. “Enjoy your bath, Captain. I will see about getting you a clean set of clothes from your bag. Then we will go down to the tavern for a hot meal.”

Starblade watched him, his eyes wary. “You’re going to let me take a bath—alone?”

Vardox bowed graciously. “But of course, darling.” At the door, he turned and glanced over his shoulder. “After all, I have plans for you later this evening. I need you to be back to your usual hale and hearty self. Be sure to cleanse yourself ... everywhere. My tentacles and I intend to get intimately reacquainted with you later.” And with that, he closed the door behind him on Starblade’s growl of irritation.

After a short while, Vardox led his still leery companion down to the tavern. Deep inside, Vardox was feeling far more reassured that the captain was once again well. The hot bath had revived him, and his dry change of clothing kept him warm in the heated comfort of the inn. Nevertheless, Vardox ensured they got a cozy table together, right in front of the roaring fireplace that took up one entire wall of the tavern.

Starblade took this seat with his back facing the fire and moaned with pleasure. “God that feels good.”

Behind his cloak, Vardox’s tentacles rubbed together with satisfaction. They enjoyed taking care of this man. Well, they enjoyed doing other things to him too. But for now, Vardox avoided thinking of such pursuits. He was still a little off kilter realizing just how worried he’d been.

Vardox had had little reason to interact with humans over the years. They were, of course, far less evolved than many other species in the universe, who had been traveling the galaxies for millennia before humans could leave the small confines of their own orbit. But after meeting his sweet captain, Vardox had made it his mission to study Starblade's species in order to know him better. It had quite appalled him to learn just how vulnerable and fragile these human creatures were. So many things could kill them. And their bodies were not designed to protect them from the world let alone the dangers of the universe. Indeed, they were quite delicate, and that was nothing compared to the short life expectancy they possessed. Most species in the universe lived three to four times as long as humans, if not longer. Starblade was not an old man, but Vardox did not like to think about the fact that in a few short decades, he would enter his golden years and a period of decline toward the inevitable.

No, Vardox did not like that at all.

In fact, he had already begun to enquire with several other more advanced species about what it would take to genetically alter the life expectancy of a human male. He preferred not to think about why he was looking into such matters, especially when they were far more costly than anything Vardox had ever spent his hard earned currency on before.

After all, Vardox had told himself time and time again that this thing with Starblade was merely a passing fancy. Something that he would quickly tire of and move on from. But it hadn't quite gone the way he had expected. Indeed, his need and desire for the captain grew with each interaction they had. As a Masnok man in his prime, Vardox realized the signs of an intended mate no matter how much he'd wanted to deny it. He had long sworn that he would never fall sway to such foolish biological instincts; he was better than that. Vardox would be the master of his own

destiny. His tentacles, and their so-called 'instincts,' would not drag him around like other men.

But with Captain Tiberius Starblade, everything was different. Vardox's reason went out the window.

He no longer wanted to resist his desire for the captain. If anything, Vardox wanted to steal him away and hide him from others, keeping him to himself. To torture and pleasure in equal measure.

The feelings were foolish for so many reasons though. After all, Captain Starblade had made it quite clear that he had far more ambivalent sentiments towards Vardox. To be sure, the man enjoyed his time between the sheets with Vardox, no matter how he might protest otherwise. The captain had always been a willing partner, if a defiantly submissive one at that. No, Starblade didn't want to want Lord Vardox—and Vardox knew it. A faint pain twinged in his chest at that thought and he rubbed at it absently.

For now, Vardox realized he needed to do something he had never done before. He needed to woo his sweet captain.

A barmaid came and took their dinner order before bringing them piping hot mugs of mulled moon wine, fragrant with the unusual spices of this world.

Starblade sniffed at the steaming beverage before taking a cautious sip. When he broke into a beaming smile, it made Vardox's tentacles flutter in time with his heart.

"This tastes an awful lot like the mulled wine my mother used to make at Christmas back home on Earth."

Vardox perked up. He had heard of this unusual human holiday.

"Chris-t-mas? This is a pagan winter holiday, is it not?"

Starblade chuckled. "I believe its origins are, yes, but it got co-opted by religious ideology like many things on my home world." He shook his head. "My family isn't religious, but we always celebrate Christmas. For us, it's more about family and certain traditions that we do together every time the holiday rolls around." He sipped on his mulled wine. "In fact, it's almost that time of year back home now. I'd have to check my intergalactic calendar, but I believe it's our Christmas season back home."

Vardox leaned forward, his elbows on the table. "Tell me more about these Chris-t-mas traditions."

Starblade blinked at him in surprise. "Why do you care?"

Vardox waved a hand airily. "We must have some conversation. It's not like we have anything better to do while we sup. I have not known many Earthlings in my wanderings across the universe. I am interested in learning more about your culture."

Starblade eyed him with suspicion but then set his mug down, getting a far away look in his eyes. "Well, where I come from, we usually have snow, much like we're experiencing on this planet right now, at Christmas. It takes place during our winter season. When we can, my family all get together to celebrate. On Christmas Eve we have a big potluck where everybody brings a dish to share for the evening, and we eat and play games for hours. In the morning, we all get up and meet downstairs in the family room where we have a Christmas tree set up. There are presents underneath it, and stockings over the fireplace."

"Stockings?"

"Much like you might imagine from the name, they're fashioned after an elongated and oversized sock that's used more like a bag and filled with

different treats and small gifts. We wrap larger presents in colored paper with ribbons and bows.”

“What is the point of the packages?”

Starblade eyed him with what might be pity. “They’re gifts. It’s the gift-giving season after all. It’s a way for you to show your loved ones how much you care about them.”

Vardox stroked his chin thoughtfully. The Masnok people were not a communal let alone gift-giving society. Most Masnoks, when they reached majority age, preferred to operate solo. Masnoks did not do well together. In large groups, they were far too competitive and dominant. It never ended well. “I see. That is most interesting.”

“Haven’t you ever gotten presents before?”

Vardox considered this. “Not without the giver expecting to get something in return.”

Starblade cocked his head. “How so?”

“Well, there have been certain individuals who have wanted to hire me for jobs and sought to sweeten the deal with lavish gifts. However, I have never accepted them as I do not care to create a reputation for being swayed by such fripperies.” He paused, thinking. “I once had a rather tenacious pair of suitors who wanted to court me with a permanent relationship in mind. They came from West Rusandia Minor. A polyamorous species of shapeshifters that could change their sex at will.” Vardox chuckled. “They were most entertaining in bed but I had no interest in being part of their polycule. But for months, I received many...unusual gifts from them through the intergalactic post. It became rather annoying having to return them all, as on their planet, accepting a gift was tantamount to accepting their courtship.”

Starblade gaped at him, flabbergasted. “Didn’t your family ever give you gifts for your birthday or

other holidays on your home world?”

Vardox snorted. “Masnoks are not known for such. We are more...competitive by nature. We would rather best one another than anything else.”

“That explains a lot,” Starblade muttered.

Before Vardox could inquire as to his meaning, a tavern worker appeared at their table depositing bowls of steaming, savory stew and thick slices of warm, freshly baked bread and butter. His human companion fell on the meal with ravenous enthusiasm, and Vardox could not stop the deep sense of pleasure and contentment in his gut at feeding the captain.

“Mmmm,” Starblade murmured around a mouthful of food. “Tastes a bit like lamb stew back home.” He slathered a thick layer of butter on his bread before taking a huge bite and moaning with pleasure. “God that’s good. I can’t remember the last time I had fresh bread.”

Vardox tackled his own meal more slowly, far too interested in watching his companion. He needed to learn more about this ‘Chris-t-mas’ because it could help him with a plan that was taking shape in his ever calculating mind.

“Tell me more about this winter holiday. Is it only about giving gifts to loved ones?”

Starblade blinked up from his already half-eaten bowl of stew. “No. I mean, it varies from family to family I suppose. Since we aren’t religious, we don’t attend church services or events like that. Like I mentioned before, we have a big Christmas meal together, and we have special dishes that are particular to our family. My favorite was always the sweet potato casserole and pecan pie that my mother would make.”

Vardox frowned as he buttered his own bread. “These are human delicacies?”

*“Yeah. And we often make mulled wine like this.”
He inhaled the scent from his mug with relish. “A hot
spiced wine that tastes and smells like Christmas.”*

*“Then I am glad that this inn had their own version
of a drink quite similar to yours for you to enjoy.”*

*Starblade nodded, his expression turning sheepish.
“I will say it has made me a bit homesick. I haven’t
been home for Christmas in years.”*

*The statement sent Vardox’s mind into hyperdrive.
Perhaps he could use this holiday as an excuse to
covertly woo his captain? The season of Chris-t-mas
cheer and gift-giving was the perfect excuse to propose
a ceasefire between them. A brief respite in which they
could indulge in their desires to their hearts’ content.
His tentacles shivered with excitement at the prospect.
Yes, Vardox was going to make the captain an offer he
couldn’t refuse tonight.*

I trail off for dramatic effect and then glance up to see Kai’s gorgeous amethyst eyes boring into mine.

“What?”

Kai strokes his chin, considering. “This new story is quite compelling in terms of the unexpected developments it’s bringing into the equation between Vardox and Starblade.”

I grin. “On the surface, it seems like just a cutesy spin-off holiday story, but in actuality this is a major turning point for the characters, especially Vardox.”

Kai nods his head. “Readers of your story have long known Vardox has feelings for Starblade that are more than mere lust or the desire to make him submit.”

My boo totally gets it. “I’ve been laying the groundwork for a while, but I think it’s obvious that even though he is a villain on many levels, Vardox cares deeply for Starblade. He understands his feelings far sooner than Starblade will realize his own. That’s part of his penance to make him redeemable to readers.”

Kai leans forward, eagerness written all over his face. “But surely Starblade must have an inkling of Vardox’s feelings, especially during this night together?”

I hold up a hand, halting him. “Slow your roll, boo. We’re getting to that part.”

He grins from ear to ear. “I can’t wait.”

I reach out and poke him in the side in just the right spot I know is ticklish, and he squirms out of the way with a gasp of outrage. “No tickling allowed!”

I stick my tongue out at him and grin. “I’m going to continue reading but first I want some of your input. Anything you think I should change moving forward?”

He considers this for a long moment. From the intensity of his expression, I can tell he’s taking the question seriously, which I appreciate more than he knows. Many people have mocked me for my over-the-top alien porn story, but Kai has proven to be one of my biggest fans and most ardent supporters. He reinforces my self-confidence as a writer daily.

“Perhaps you could provide a little more detail about the inn where they’re staying? Give the reader a clearer picture of what this alien world and little spaceport are like, especially through the eyes of a human character like Starblade.”

“Oooh! Good point.” I make a quick note to myself in the margins of my document. “Okay, that’s easy enough to do. Anything else?”

He hums to himself then grabs my arm in excitement. “What if during the bath scene Vardox washes Starblade’s hair while he’s trying to warm him up, and that’s when he wakes up? After all, washing someone else’s hair is a rather intimate and sensual activity. This is a moment when Starblade is vulnerable. But through his actions, Vardox can show he cares for Starblade. He’s not driven by lust but a deeper kind of emotional connection even he might not be aware of.”

“OMG! You’re reading my mind. There’s another bath scene later, and *that’s* when Vardox washes Starblade’s hair.” I raise my hand for a high five.

Kai gives my hand a gentle tap before reaching down and tugging on one of my wild, blond curls. It still surprises me that he loves them so much, but I don't question it anymore. "I adore your hair," he murmurs, "and washing it is one of my great delights."

I flutter my eyelashes at him. "You can wash my hair anytime you want, boo."

His eyes darken. "Oh, I fully intend to."

I shiver at the sensual promise in his voice before clearing my throat and fanning myself with a free hand. "Simmer down, babycakes. We haven't even gotten to the kinky part of the story yet. I don't want to get distracted from our purpose here."

Kai leans back, raising his hands in an appeasing gesture. "Sorry, sorry. I'll try to contain my lustful desires."

I roll my eyes. "No need for sarcasm, boo. Now, let's get back to the story. This is a new chapter, and this time it's from Starblade's point of view again."

"Ooh, nice," Kai says, settling in with an intrigued gleam in his eyes.

I turn my attention back to the screen and begin to read where I left off.

CHAPTER THREE



KAI

Chapter Three (Captain Starblade)

After a hearty and filling meal, the best he'd had in many moons, Starblade was feeling much more like his usual self as he sipped at his second mug of mulled wine. Warm and sated at last, he shrugged off a twinge of embarrassment for his uncharacteristic vulnerability earlier. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been so unwell he'd passed out. Then again, he'd never found himself unprepared in a snowstorm, and on an empty stomach no less. He tried to give himself some grace for that. But the circumstances still irked him, because the one man in the universe he would not have wished to witness his moment of weakness had in fact likely saved him from becoming hypothermic. Nevertheless, Starblade was man enough to admit he owed Vardox a debt of gratitude.

Sobering, he cleared his throat meaningfully, garnering Vardox's full attention. "I should have said this before..." Starblade squirmed in his chair. "But, thank you for sharing your room with me and—" He cleared his throat again. "And for helping me when I became unwell. For my species, it's quite easy to lose core body temperature and become hypothermic in winter conditions, especially when ill prepared for the elements." He swallowed, his throat dry. "Thank you."

Vardox's answering smile was slow and sensual. Everything about the man oozed sexuality. It would be appealing if it weren't so damned frustrating. Starblade still found it difficult to reconcile Vardox's nefarious reputation as one of the most deadly traders in the universe with his own principles, which told him he couldn't desire such a man. Yet, sometimes the overpowering lust he felt for Vardox was more than he could bear. Starblade had not met other Masnok men before, but he assumed even among his own people, Lord Vardox was quite handsome. With his wavy dark hair that cascaded down to his shoulders, and his shimmering dark eyes that could sometimes change color depending on his mood, Vardox was impressive to behold. In the throes of ecstasy, he was even more stunning.

The same height as Starblade, Vardox's muscular body had been honed from regular training with various arms and not from the synthetic steroids some favored. And of course there were his damnably talented, crimson tentacles. Just thinking about them and the things they could do to bring him pleasure made Starblade shiver.

No, he would not let his mind focus on such distractions!

"It was my pleasure," Vardox drawled in a rich, husky voice that never failed to make all the blood in Starblade's head rush toward his traitorous dick.

Vardox tilted his head and watched him with a look that Starblade could not quite decipher. "You mentioned it was almost this 'Chris-t-mas' holiday back on Earth." He casually waved a long-fingered hand tipped with dark talons. "In the spirit of the 'gift-giving' season as you described it, I propose we set aside our differences—" Starblade began to protest but Vardox continued, talking over him. "Temporarily, of course, darling." His tone became sweet and coaxing. "After all, I'm afraid we are stuck here for the night.

Personally, I think we should make the most of it and enjoy ourselves. It will be a secret holiday, as it were."

Starblade eyed him dubiously. "How do I know I can trust you?"

Vardox shrugged. "I suppose you'll just have to take my word. But, may I point out that, as you noted earlier, I was so kind as to share my room and of course my bed with you. And I helped you in your hour of need. I did not molest you either. In fact, I took excellent care of you." He spread his hands wide. "I think this speaks to my pure intentions."

Starblade snorted. "You? Pure? I think you may want to reconsider your word choice."

Vardox chuckled. "Touché, darling. I will admit my intentions toward you are anything but pure. But my promises regarding a temporary ceasefire are honest."

Starblade scrutinized his companion from across the table. The man who haunted his dreams, who frustrated his desires, and who refused to leave Starblade alone. At that moment, deep down, he knew he could not resist such a tantalizing proposition. After all, it was Christmas and he damn well deserved to treat himself to a present.

Starblade reached out a hand. "Let's shake on it then."

Vardox cocked his head with interest. "This is a human custom, is it?"

Starblade nodded. "Yes. It's a gentleman's agreement, which we confirm with a mutual handshake."

Vardox's expression turned serious, and he reached out a hand, grasping Starblade's in a firm grip. It was all Starblade could do to hold back a shudder of pleasure at the electric zing Vardox's touch sent coursing through his body.

They shook hands, maintaining unwavering eye contact with one another.

“Let us enjoy this temporary reprieve.” Vardox rose and gestured toward their room upstairs. “Shall we retire, my sweet?”

Starblade grinned, already having visions of tentacles dancing in his head. “Hell yes. And Merry Fucking Christmas to me.”

River looks up at me, his cheeks flushed. “Er...so, this is an awkward moment to realize I’ve never actually read any of the porny bits of my story aloud for you before.”

I’m already hard in my pants and working hard to keep my eager tentacles under control. “That just makes it even hotter to me.”

Also, now I’m mentally smacking myself for not thinking of doing this sooner. After River and I got together, I owned up to my secret, hardcore fan love for his story and became his eager beta reader. But tonight is the first time River has read any of his writing aloud to me. I’ve been missing out big time. This is my new favorite activity for us to do together. With cookies. And sex afterwards. Best. Date. Ever!

River licks his lips and maneuvers himself closer to me. “I’m already way too fucking horny. Maybe we should skip this and jump ahead to the sexy times part of the evening.”

I’m hard as a rock too, but I shake my head. “Absolutely not. I need to hear what this hot ceasefire sex is like.” I give him my most wicked grin. “After all, I fully intend to test out everything they do to ensure your story is accurate.”

River gulps. “Everything?”

I purr. “Yes.”

“Holy hotness, Batman,” he whispers.

I pick up another sugar cookie and lick the frosting off in long, suggestive sweeps of my tongue—never taking my eyes off River.

“Fuck me,” he whispers, staring at my mouth.

“I will. Very soon.”

“That should not be as hot as it is, but you’re practically rimming that cookie.”

“There is an art to enjoying these cookies. Now, quit stalling and get reading.”

He shakes the dazed expression off his face and grins at me. “Aye, aye, captain.”

Chapter Four (Lord Vardox)

Vardox could not believe his good fortune. Indeed, his prickly and recalcitrant captain had jumped on his suggestion faster than a space pirate on a marooned ship. He was almost...eager to enter the agreement Vardox had proposed. It was a refreshing change.

But Vardox knew he needed to control himself tonight. After all, he wanted to use this opportunity to pleasure Starblade so that he could not think of anyone but Vardox in his bed for the foreseeable future.

Opening the door to their room, Vardox stepped aside and bowed, ushering Starblade in ahead of him. “After you, darling.”

Starblade sauntered inside and turned to regard him with narrowed eyes. “Why don’t you tell me what you’ve been scheming up for us this evening?”

Vardox shut and locked the door before giving Starblade his best attempt at an air of innocence. “Whatever do you mean, Captain?”

The gorgeous human crossed his arms and rolled his eyes. “I’ve known you long enough to know there isn’t a minute that goes by that you aren’t plotting and scheming something for your own benefit.”

Vardox shrugged. “It is indeed a tendency of most Masnoks. I cannot help what is inherent to my species, so I hope you will not hold that against me.”

Starblade scoffed. “Sounds like a convenient excuse to me.”

Vardox moved closer to loom over his delectable captain. “As charming as this banter is, I believe we’ve had more than enough of talking, don’t you? We should spend this precious time engaging in far more... pleasurable pursuits.”

A thrill coursed through Vardox when Starblade glanced at the bed before turning back to him, his expression eager but uncertain.

The bed was a decent size for what Vardox had planned, however, it could not compare to the enormous Silerian silk-covered bed that Vardox had in his personal chambers on his ship. He and Starblade had spent many an entertaining evening between those sheets. Although, on most of those occasions, Starblade had protested and feigned indignation. At first, anyway. No matter how he might try to deny it, his body always spoke the truth. It sang under Vardox’s tender—and sometimes not so tender—touch. On so many levels, Starblade was the perfect match for him.

MATE!, his tentacles whispered to him in his mind.

The truth of the matter was becoming harder to deny. But that only posed a new set of problems. Vardox did not want to contemplate the long-term challenges of wooing Starblade as a prospective mate. Tonight he would indulge in this precious carefree time together and worry about the rest later.

With slow, deliberate movements, Vardox untied the clasp of his cloak and removed it. Setting it on the back of the lone chair in the room, he began divesting himself of each piece of his attire, placing the items on the pile. Never once during this process did his gaze waver from Starblade’s. His sweet captain ogled him with open appreciation but didn’t quite seem to know how to respond.

Indeed, their usual roles were muddied at this moment. However, tonight they had agreed to set aside their differences. The captain did not need to feign resistance in order to conceal his genuine desires. Vardox already knew what compelled the captain to resist him at every turn. Starblade was an honorable man, albeit a somewhat naïve and far too optimistic one. He believed in the goodness of others and their intentions, convinced honor and justice would always triumph.

Vardox knew better. If his cynicism and distrust of others made him unlikeable, so be it. He knew all too well that far too many beings in the universe were all for what they could get for themselves, with nary a care for whoever they might crush and ruin along the way. Vardox refused to let himself be used or manipulated in someone else's bid to gain power or fortune. He preferred to be the one stepping on those who deserved it.

Although his reputation as a villain had spread far and wide, it was much less well known that Vardox did not trifle with innocents. Instead, he preferred to torture and annihilate the most contemptible scum of the universe who took advantage of those who could not protect themselves. Vardox derived a great deal of pleasure from thwarting such corrupt creatures' plans and profiting on their ruination instead.

But Starblade still believed all the ludicrous gossip circulating about Vardox, and so considered him a vile villain he could not trust with his heart. Vardox knew it would be futile to dissuade him otherwise, especially tonight. He suspected it gave the captain a certain amount of reassurance to believe that Vardox was using some nefarious power to coerce him into sex. Starblade was a flawed, hypocritical hero who wanted to uphold a set of principles that were laudable on one level, but laughable on the rest.

Vardox had not reached the ripe age of 325 without having seen a thing or two in his time. Most of those centuries he had spent exploring the universe and its many galaxies—but across them all he found that regardless of species, far too many beings were untrustworthy when it came down to matters of money, survival, desire, or power. The captain was still young, naïve, and woefully idealistic—but for some unfathomable reason it only made him even more desirable. Vardox shook his head, his mouth curling in a moue of amusement at the thought.

Starblade ran a nervous hand through his wavy, golden hair. “What now?”

Vardox stood before him, his erect cock more than eager to get the lovemaking underway. His tentacles quivered in the air, eager to lay claim to his captain’s body once again.

OURS, the crooned inside his mind.

Even in a moment like this, it was clear to Vardox that his sweet Starblade needed a man who could take control of him in the bedroom. Although a brash, take-charge man in his pursuits as a ship captain, between the sheets the man liked to let go, to be told what to do—to have someone else lead. Vardox relished that fact.

“Undress,” he commanded, “and get on the bed.”

Starblade stared at him wide-eyed and Vardox moved closer, a confident strut to his step. Without warning, one of his tentacles lashed out and smacked the captain hard on his ass. “Don’t make me repeat myself, darling. Or there will be a punishment.”

Starblade flushed crimson, his eyes going smoky with passion. It was a look Vardox recognized all too well and craved when Starblade was not with him.

With far less finesse than Vardox, Starblade shucked his clothing and crawled onto the bed, his own erection bobbing with enthusiasm.

“Good,” Vardox praised. “Now, place the pillows behind your back to prop you up against the headrest.”

Starblade complied and Vardox hungrily looked his fill, perusing Starblade’s naked body on display just for him.

Starblade swallowed again. “What...are you doing?”

“Surveying the bounty of my feast before I consume it.”

“Holy fucking hell,” Starblade whispered before letting out a whimper of need.

Vardox glided to the bed and climbed upon it, positioning himself so that he was hovering over his lover. Leaning closer, he laid his hands against the back of the headrest, bringing his rock hard cock in line with Starblade’s tempting mouth. “I want you to suck me,” he explained, his voice calm but commanding.

Starblade shivered and goose pimples rose on his flesh. Vardox reveled in the fact that he had such an effect on the man, but he did not let it show on his face. As a Masnok in his prime, Vardox was physiologically quite similar to most bipedal humanoid species—except for the tentacles, of course. However, his cock was a bit different from a human’s.

Longer than most males, he also had greater girth. But it was the ridged cartilage lining his cock all the way down the shaft that had been intimidating to his lover at first. Now, Vardox knew Starblade couldn’t get enough of those ridges. They rubbed the captain in all the right places.

Starblade stared at his erect member and licked his lips, a hungry gleam entering his cerulean blue eyes.

Reaching out a hand, Vardox took hold of the captain’s hair and tugged his head back forcefully but not aiming to inflict pain—rather, he wanted

compliance. “Open that pretty, talented mouth of yours and give me what I want.”

Starblade whined.

“Do you remember your safe words?”

He nodded and vocalized them.

“Good,” Vardox praised before he pulled Starblade’s hair again, making him gasp with pleasure. “Now, what do you say to me when I give you an order?”

“Yes, sir.” Starblade moaned.

“Yesssss,” Vardox hissed. “That’s right.”

With that, Starblade sucked Vardox’s swollen cock into his tight, hot mouth. It was heaven and hell all at once, all pleasure and agony for more. Vardox had to admit, Captain Starblade’s own reputation as a lover had not been exaggerated. The man’s mouth was beyond talented. But after several delightful moments of Starblade slurping down his cock and tonguing his ridges with animated enthusiasm, Vardox had to pull back and slow down. After all, he was the one in charge here and he needed to regain control over his own body, which was already teetering far too close to orgasm.

There was just something about Tiberius Starblade that caused Vardox to lose the tightly contained control he prided himself on. Never with another lover had he felt so wild and ruled by his passions. It was heady but also dangerous.

But for tonight, at least, Vardox would let no worries enter his mind. He was going to enjoy this fantasy ‘Chris-t-mas’ holiday with Starblade. Reality would come back to confront them all too soon. For now, he intended to savor his delectable captain to the fullest.

Starblade gazed up at him, his lips puffy and slick with his saliva, his eyes glazed. “Wasn’t it good?”

Vardox took a hold of the base of his cock and gave it a firm squeeze. “Your mouth is most talented, darling. I just don’t want to rush to the finish line yet. As you know, I prefer to take my time with you, darling.

Starblade’s cheeks flushed. “You like to torture me, you mean.”

“That too, my dear captain.”

CHAPTER FOUR



RIVER

I pause in my reading to fan myself. “Is it just me or is it getting hot in here?”

Even Kai looks flushed and aroused. “Shall we...er...take a brief break?”

I adjust my boner. Stupid tight jeans! “If you don’t want me to come in my pants real soon, then yes.”

Kai jumps up off the couch, adjusting himself as well. “Sweet galactic gods, I think I need another cup of hot cocoa.”

I grin up at him. “Sure, I’ll just chill here while you make yourself another cup.”

He turns, holding his hands up to his chin in a prayer pose. “Would you make it for me, please?” His gorgeous eyes go full puppy dog on me. “You make it better than anyone else, with all the tasty marshmallows and just the right ratio of sugar to chocolate.”

I can’t help it. I dissolve into laughter. Kai is too motherfreaking cute sometimes. Once I manage to take a breath and calm myself, I set aside my laptop with an exaggerated sigh. “Fine. Come with me. I’ll show you how I work my magic.”

He trails behind me like an overeager puppy waiting to be fed. As I pull out the saucepan from earlier, I set to work mixing cocoa powder, sugar, milk, and a splash of vanilla

extract on the stove. Once I have the mixture warming in the saucepan, I stir it slowly.

Kai moves in behind me and sniffs the air with an appreciative hum as he wraps his arms around my waist. “Mmmm. Smells good,” he murmurs in my ear.

“It’ll be ready soon,” I tell him as his lips trail kisses down my neck. I tremble at the whisper fine touch.

“I wasn’t talking about the cocoa.”

Sweet mama RuPaul on a cracker. This man can get me so tied up in knots with wanting him I don’t even know what to do with myself.

I set aside my wooden spoon and turn to face him, pulling his hips into mine and groaning at the hard length I find there. “Stop distracting me, sir.”

Kai pulls back. “Sorry. I couldn’t help myself.”

I grin and turn back to my saucepan, stirring the cocoa until it steams. When it’s ready, I pour it into his mug and then add my secret ingredient—a splash of Bailey’s Irish Cream—before dumping a boatload of mini marshmallows on top. I know my man, after all.

Kai’s eyes are wider than a little kid with visions of sugar plums dancing in his head. He licks his lips with anticipation but keeps his gaze focused on the mug of cocoa and not me.

I roll my eyes again. “Nothing kills the mood quite like you choosing cocoa over your sexy as fuck boyfriend.”

“Isn’t chocolate an aphrodisiac? I’m merely preparing for later. Besides, you wouldn’t want perfectly good cocoa to go cold, would you?” He punctuates that with a pouty lip.

I shake my head in amusement. “It’s all good, boo. I’ll keep reading you some of the story while your mouth worships my hot cocoa.”

He leans over and gives me a soft kiss on the lips. “Thank you for making this for me. And don’t worry. My mouth will worship you plenty later.”

“It better.” I try to sound stern but I’m pretty sure the expression on my face is mega sappy. There isn’t much I wouldn’t do for this man. He’s got me wrapped around his finger—I mean, tentacles. And I want him to always be happy. Until he found me, he wasn’t lucky in love. He had an awful experience that put him off dating—especially dating humans—for over a decade. That window of time might seem a little outrageous to most people. It did to me as well at first, but I’ve come to realize that his species is quite long lived, and ten years is probably a bit more like three to five human years for them.

My own heritage is complicated. A few weeks ago, I discovered that I too am part extraterrestrial, although from a very different species called the Quintharians who, by the way, seem like major buttholes. They have some kind of ridiculous aristocratic hierarchy on their planet, and they killed my mom and my dad for daring to have an interspecies marriage. I guess Mom was supposed to marry some blowhard royal on her home world. Mad props to her for being a kickass rebel. It’s completely unfair that she had to pay for that with her life.

I miss her and my dad so much. There isn’t a day that goes by that I don’t still think of them. But I was ten when it happened, and twelve years later it feels far away—the edge of pain dulled but familiar. The grief never goes away. Not entirely, but it softens and frays at the edges like an old coat, familiar and well-worn but oddly comfortable.

We sit back on the couch and I smile like a lovesick fool while I watch my adorkable boyfriend chasing marshmallows around in his cup while slurping back hot chocolate like it is the sweetest ambrosia of the gods. Honestly, it seems to be the simple things that bring him so much pleasure. And let me tell you, if pumping him full of sugar and chocolate is what’s going to make him happy, then by golly, I will do that every fucking day for the rest of our lives!

I may need to invest in stock with Hershey’s, but, you know, I’m cool with that.

After several minutes of erotic slurping noises and moaning in rapture, Kai tilts back the mug and drains the last

of the hot chocolate before coming back to himself with a dazed glow of satisfaction on his face.

I can't help it, I have to ask. "Do you need a cigarette after that?"

He frowns. "Why? Those things are foul."

"It's a human thing. We have lots of movies where characters need a cigarette after good sex."

His brows furrow. "I did *not* have sex with my cocoa."

"Pretty darn close."

He scoffs and sets his mug down before pulling me into his arms. "Were you jealous?"

I tap my chin with my index finger. "I did wonder if I needed to leave you two alone for a while."

He chuckles. "I got a little distracted by my beverage."

I snort. "Yeah, I thought you were going to run off with it and leave me behind. You nearly made love to that mug. Kind of like those cookies earlier. I'm sensing a theme."

He trails kisses from behind my ear and down my neck, making my cock pulse with frustrated need in my still way too tight pants. "You are the hot cocoa master of my dreams."

He says it so earnestly it makes me breathless.

I clear my throat. "Are you satiated? Have you gotten a sufficient chocolate fix? May I continue with my story?"

He rubs his belly and favors me with a ridiculous grin. "My tentacles and I are very satisfied. You may continue," he proclaims with a lazy wave of his hand.

"As you wish," I tell him, doing my best Westley impersonation from *The Princess Bride*.

Chapter Five (Captain Starblade)

Things were moving faster than Starblade had expected. Tonight was different. He wasn't resisting for once. It was almost like the first time they'd been

together when he hadn't had an inkling who Vardox really was. Right here and right now, he was following where his desires led him—and damned if they didn't want to be told what to fucking do by Lord Loki Vardox.

Starblade knew he ought to feel ashamed for wanting to be dominated by such a man. But he could not muster the faintest hint of such a sentiment. No. Tonight, he wanted everything he ordinarily refused to let himself have when he was with Vardox. On this Christmas night, he would submit his whole body to Vardox's every whim. But as always, he would guard and protect his heart. He wanted Vardox, but he didn't trust the man.

Starblade's attention returned to his lover as two of his tentacles shot out and took hold of Starblade's legs, wrenching them wide open and exposing his aching hole to Vardox's avid perusal. The sensation, as always, was shocking and embarrassing, but Starblade concentrated on relaxing his body—giving himself over to Vardox's control.

"Yessss," Vardox hissed again, his forked tongue flicking out and licking his luscious lips. "Let me explore that naughty hole of yours."

Starblade's puckered entrance spasmed at his words.

"You like that, don't you?"

Starblade nodded, helpless to deny it.

"Very good. Such a good, submissive captain," Vardox praised, and Starblade reveled in the warmth rushing to his core.

Vardox leaned closer, taking his wickedly sharp talon-tipped fingers and almost tenderly spreading Starblade's ass cheeks to expose him to the cool air. Starblade convulsed with desire and need. Vardox leaned in closer and his tentacles lifted Starblade's ass

in the air so he could bring his face close to Starblade's hole.

"I have decided that I must taste you, my dear captain. It's been a while since I had the pleasure of loosening your hole with my tongue." Said tongue flicked out and glided over Starblade's entrance in a slick, teasing touch.

He gasped. "Oh, holy fuck."

"Don't worry, darling. The fucking will happen, but for now I am going to use my mouth on you to get that pretty pink hole loose and wet for me. I need to make sure you're ready to take my cock and at least one of my tentacles."

Starblade shivered at those words, his hole clenching with need again.

Vardox hesitated for a moment before asking, almost too casually, "Have there been any others since I was with you last?"

Starblade swallowed and shook his head. "No," he rasped.

Vardox rose and looked down at him with a gaze that was molten hot with desire. Starblade stared in awe as Vardox's eyes flashed fiery gold for several seconds before returning to their usual stormy gray coloring. "That is most excellent, my sweet."

Lifting his chin defiantly, Starblade dared to ask, "What about you? Have there been others...for you?"

Something happened then to Vardox's face that made Starblade's heart gallop in his chest. Vardox's expression became so tender that Starblade thought it might make his heart explode.

"Darling," Vardox whispered, "there has been no one but you since we first met on Keltara IV."

Starblade gasped. "But that was many moons ago!" Almost two human years in fact.

“You’ve spoiled me for anyone else, my dear captain.”

Vardox’s revelation was stunning. Starblade stared at him, unable to look away from his steady gaze. There was a wealth of emotion brewing there beneath the surface that Starblade was almost afraid to decipher.

“This means nothing,” he blurted out desperately, “Between us, I mean.” His heart raced double time, as if contradicting him.

Vardox gave a long, loud sigh. “My dearest captain, you may tell yourself whatever you need to in order to make this time together acceptable to you, but one day, I promise you, this thing between us will mean so much more.”

There was an uncanny note of certainty, almost finality, to Vardox’s words that made Starblade squirm with the desire to run. He didn’t have anywhere to go, but he wanted to flee from what Vardox was suggesting. However, the tentacles holding him aloft tightened their grip, keeping him restrained and under Vardox’s complete and utter control.

“Calm yourself, darling,” Vardox soothed. “Remember, tonight is about setting aside our differences and enjoying this Chris-t-mas holiday of yours.”

Starblade swallowed as he tried to calm his racing heart. “I haven’t gotten you a gift.” He had no idea why he said that and flushed in embarrassment.

Vardox’s answering grin was positively wicked and made Starblade’s cock twitch with need. “Dearest, your body and your submission are all the gifts I shall ever need.”

Damn the man, but he knew what to say to flip all of Starblade’s switches. Valiantly attempting to regain some control in these turbulent waters, Starblade

steeled his resolve. “And what will I be getting from you?”

Vardox leered as if he’d been waiting for that very question. “You’ll be getting my enormous cock and several of my tentacles. They will bring you to the precipice of pleasure over and over and over again. After all, we have all night, maybe longer.”

Never had Starblade secretly wished that a snowstorm would last for days—until now.

“I shall keep you in this bed until the storm has passed,” Vardox promised.

Starblade shivered at the prospect.

Vardox’s tentacles lifted Starblade again, his ass in the air and cheeks spread wide open. Vardox leaned in and inhaled deeply of Starblade’s musk before flicking his talented, forked tongue out and teasing the puckered entrance.

Starblade cried out at the divine sensation.

“Patience, precious,” Vardox crooned before his tongue circled the outer rim of Starblade’s desperate hole, causing him to clench involuntarily. Starblade felt a need, an ache, deep inside him to be filled by this man. Never had he had another lover who could intuit what he needed—and what would drive him crazy in bed every damn time. If Starblade didn’t know better, he might think Vardox was telepathic. He seemed to know what Starblade wanted even before he did.

As Vardox’s talented tongue slipped inside him, Starblade cried out again at the sheer pleasure of it. Vardox’s tongue undulated and flicked inside, the forked tip massaging Starblade’s channel in a way that was painfully pleasurable and somehow not quite enough. It was like a delicious hors d’oeuvre that tasted good, but once you’d swallowed the bite-sized morsel, it left you wanting and hungry for more. And

Starblade was more than ready for the full course with Lord Vardox.

He clenched his channel around Vardox's tongue, earning him a grunt before relaxing again. "Quit teasing me and get your big fucking cock inside me right now, dammit."

Vardox pulled back, his tentacles still restraining Starblade but allowing Vardox to move far enough back that Starblade could watch as the man stroked his ridged cock, a look of calm control on his face. "Now, now. Have you forgotten who's in charge here?"

Starblade narrowed his eyes. "Maybe it's you who's forgetting that the sub is the one who calls the shots. I have the power to end this all with a word."

Vardox grinned, flashing a hint of fang. "Touché, my sweet. However, I don't give into demands from bratty subs. Beg me for what you want; do not demand it."

Starblade huffed. "And you wonder why I find you irritating."

"Oh, darling. I know you love it. You just don't want to admit it."

"I do not!"

Before Starblade even realized what was happening, one of Vardox's free tentacles lashed out like a whip and struck his bare ass with a loud smack. He gasped. "How dare you?"

"I dare quite a lot, Captain. But I don't appreciate back talk or lies. For that, there's going to be some punishment."

Starblade squawked in outrage as Vardox's tentacles lifted him in the air and laid him across Vardox's knee, ass up. "You're going to take your spanking like a good sub, aren't you?"

Starblade glared back at him over his shoulder.

“I do so love your fiery disposition,” Vardox murmured before steeling his expression. “Now count off for me, Captain.” His tentacle whipped out and lashed Starblade’s ass cheeks a second time, leaving a painful throbbing ache in their wake.

Starblade clenched his teeth and began to count...

“So,” Kai says, when I pause in my reading, “can I ask you what inspired you to create a dominance and submission dynamic between Vardox and Starblade? I know you aren’t into serious BDSM stuff in the bedroom, unless there’s something you haven’t told me.”

I chuckle. “No, I experimented some in my club days. Went to one or two leather bars, and knew a few people on the scene who let me tag along. But I didn’t get the enjoyment from it that people I know who are really into it do. To me it felt more like a forced performance than a natural thing.”

Kai tilts his head, considering this. “So why kinky Starblade and Vardox?”

I lean back on the arm of the couch, getting comfortable. “It wasn’t planned at first. But when those two came together on the page, it became very clear to me that there was a power exchange between them. And I knew it was fundamental to their relationship. I just didn’t realize that it was going to be sexual at first, that came later.”

Kai ruminates on this for a moment. “You know, I haven’t asked you a lot about your writing process so far. It doesn’t sound like you do a lot of planning. Do you just... sort of... wing it when you write?”

I giggle at the horrified look he’s directing my way. My sweet, detail-oriented planner of a boyfriend looks disturbed at this possibility.

“I’m not sure I’d say I ‘wing it’ exactly, but I’m not much of what you’d call a plotter. I’d say I’m about ninety percent a discovery writer. The characters take me on their journey and I discover what’s going to happen as they do.” I shrug. “I rarely know what that’s going to be, and that’s kind of what

happened with the BDSM element in this story. Vardox swaggered into my brain one day, all cocky confidence and haughty superiority. He told me he was a Dom, and he was looking for a beautiful himbo of a sub who could be the perfect man for him—and lo-and-behold, Captain Starblade waltzed into my brain not long after. It's just how these things happen sometimes.”

Kai blinks at me. “That...is...amazing. And I don't know how you keep any of it straight in your head. I'd need to have it all mapped out in advance, to keep track of every little detail. Honestly, I am fascinated by how your brain works.”

I lean away with exaggerated fear. “Don't be getting a creepy ‘I must experiment on you now’ alien vibe.”

Kai lets out a startled laugh. “Oh, I want to explore your body all right, but your brain isn't the first place I plan to start.”

Fuck yeah.

I toss my computer aside and jump in Kai's lap, grinding up on him and capturing his mouth in a scorching kiss that should make it very clear I'm ready to rock his universe. My fingers trail down to his waistband, and just as I shove my hand inside to grasp his thick, stiff cock—the doorbell rings.

CHAPTER FIVE



KAI

I'm achingly hard when River shoves his hand down my pants and grabs hold of my cock. "Galactic gods, *yes*."

Green eyes twinkling, River grins and opens his mouth to say something when the doorbell chimes like the world's worst cockblocking device to have ever been invented.

"Who the hell could that be?" River whispers.

I frown. "No idea."

"Maybe we can pretend no one's home and they'll go away?"

The bell rings again and I sigh. "I get the impression they're not going to leave us alone. Can you...ahem...let go of my dick so I can go answer the door?"

River pouts. "Just when things were getting good and sexy times were imminent." After giving my cock one last squeeze for good measure, he releases me and removes his hand from my pants, giving the front of my jeans a soft pat. "Don't worry, buddy. I'll get back to you soon."

I blurt out a laugh and River grins.

Rising awkwardly from the couch, my hard-on slow to come down from our storytelling foreplay, I make my way to the front door with an uncomfortable gait.

The bell chimes again, just as I open the door. I'm ready to instill the fear of a grumpy tentacled alien in whoever is

standing there and trying to bother us, but to my surprise it's River's uncle. I stare. "Benji, what are you doing here?"

Disheveled, as always, he's wearing a ripped pair of paint-flecked jeans and a faded yellow Cheech and Chong T-shirt under a navy blue zip-up hoodie. He's pulled his long hair back in a messy man bun, but several long tendrils have escaped the confines of his updo to trail down his shoulders and back.

There's also a smudge of what looks like drying mud on his cheek. *No*, I correct myself, *most likely it's clay*. That must mean he's been sculpting. In the short time I've known him, he's been working on paintings but River told me he has a pottery studio in their back shed that he uses for when he's compelled to create in that medium.

Contrary to his usual mellow self, tonight Benji's twitchy and anxious-looking. He's also carrying a large rectangular box that appears to be heavy.

"I gotta come in, man. I need to see River."

"Of course."

He heaves a sigh of relief and barrels past me into the house, calling out, "River! You gotta help me, man."

I trail after him and watch as he comes to an abrupt, wide-eyed halt in the living room taking in River's Christmas decoration extravaganza.

"Whoaaaa. This is seriously trippy. Did I forget what month it is? Is it Christmas already?"

River chuckles from his seat on the couch. "No, I'm having a special Christmas-themed date night with Kai. I wanted to get him in the mood so he could listen to my Tentacular Tales Christmas novella draft."

Benji droops with relief. "Oh, thank goodness. I thought maybe I'd lost a couple of months. That hasn't happened to me since I experimented with acid back in the day." He shudders. "I don't want to relive that time. I'm too damn old. It was a wild and trippy ride, but that year of my life was more than enough for me."

River pats a seat on the couch and urges Benji over. “Come tell me what’s going on. Why’d you need to see me? You know you could have called.”

With careful movements, Benji carries the large box over and sets it on the coffee table after River moves stuff out of the way.

Before he can explain what the hell is so urgent, Benji gets distracted by *my* plate of cookies. “You made cookies?” he asks River. Then he frowns. “And you didn’t save any for me?”

River shrugs. “They’re not pot cookies.”

Benji gets a woebegone look on his face. “But you know I love sugar cookies, especially when I’ve got the munchies.” His eyes get dreamy. “All that sugary frosting and sprinkles. It’s heaven, man.”

My hearts flutter at his brilliant words. Before I realize it, I’m striding forward and clasping both of Benji’s hands in a firm grip. “Truer words were never spoken, Benji. I’m starting to realize just how brilliant you are.”

He grins, looking pleased with himself. “That’s awesome, dude. I think you’re pretty cool too.”

“As my fellow sweet-toothed brethren, you understand that sugar cookies are a most divine human creation and one that we should experience far more often than on arbitrary human holidays.”

Benji nods. “Sugar cookies rock. We should get River to make them for us on a more regular basis.”

I stare into his eyes, a paler shade of green than River’s. “Benji, I knew it when I ate those magic brownies with you, but you are a wise man, a sage even.” I blink at him in amazement. “I have never loved you more than at this moment.”

He gives me a dopey grin. “Aw, that’s sweet, Kai. I love you too, man. After all, you’re gonna be my future nephew-in-law.” He winks. “Whenever you and River get around to tying the knot, that is.”

River gives me an expectant look and I swallow. “Uh... yeah. About that... It will definitely happen—and soon,” I promise.

In actuality, I’ve been thinking about it for a while now, but the pressure has gotten to me more than I could have imagined. Usually, I’m very calm and collected about most things. When it comes to planning, I’m bloody brilliant if I say so myself. But, for some reason, I’ve been feeling out of my depth in trying to come up with a memorable proposal for River. He’s a romantic at heart and, as he likes to say, sometimes a little ‘extra’. So, I know deep down in his overzealous heart of hearts, he wants a showy and impressive proposal. Something he’ll never forget. And no matter how much the thought of that horrifies me, I yearn to give it to him—because he deserves it. He should be romanced and treated like the amazing and special man he is—and I am determined to make it happen. But for now, I’m still trying to figure out *what* that’s going to entail.

I know I could ask River’s best friend, Evan, for ideas. Hell, I could even ask Benji. But I want to do this on my own. I want it to be something I come up with that conveys the depth of my feelings for this man, so I can’t rely on anyone else to do it for me. I’ll ask for help in execution if I need to, but I’m going to come up with a plan for this proposal on my own.

No pressure, right?

Benji shifts his gaze back to the plate of cookies. “My Spacebrother, would you be willing to let me partake of one of your most excellent sugar cookies?”

I gaze longingly at the plate and then dart a glance at River’s amused countenance. I stand up straighter and shake Benji’s hand. “You once shared your most delicious magical brownies with me. I can share my sugar cookies with you.”

Benji’s answering grin is wide, displaying his crooked front tooth and making him seem almost boyish. “That’s so awesome, man.” He lets go of my hand after a squeeze and takes a cookie shaped like a Christmas tree, frosted green, and

covered in sprinkles. He munches on it making noises of appreciative enjoyment.

I try not to weep at the loss of a cookie, but remind myself there are a good number left.

“Excellent cookies,” Benji mumbles around a mouthful.

“They should be,” River says. “I learned most of my best baking skills from you, you know.”

Benji grins, sugar cookie stuck in his teeth and frosting on his lip. “Yeah, I had to learn how to make edibles when I was on the road with bands. We didn’t want to get harassed by the cops, and it was easier to hide our pot in a tupperware full of brownies.” He sighs. “Those were the days.”

After Benji finishes his cookie, he sits back on the couch with River. “Sorry, I got distracted. Man, I need your help.”

River looks quietly amused, as if he’s done this before. “Sure, I’ll help if I can. What’s in the box?”

Benji beams. “It’s a new piece. The thing is I don’t know what inspired it. It’s different from my other stuff—and I was hoping you could give me your take on it.”

River leans forward, already eager. “Of course. Oh my gosh! You know how much I love to see any new art that you’re working on. I’m honored you want my opinion.”

Benji nods excitedly and begins opening the box.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. I pull it out and glance at the screen to find a text from my brother.

Mal: Hey, bro, what are you up to tonight? Want to watch a movie together?

I stare at the text dumbfounded. It’s a Friday night. Mal *never* wants to get together on the weekend. Not in the evening, anyway. That’s when he goes out to the clubs and hooks up with people.

I’m immediately suspicious.

Me: Aren’t you going out? It’s Friday night.

The three dots on my screen dance as he starts to respond. My surprise turns to outright shock when his answer comes through.

Mal: I'm not in the mood to go clubbing. I haven't been feeling it lately. Why don't we have some fun bro time together instead?

I hastily type back a response.

Me: River's over here and we're having a date night.

Mal: Oh, that's fun. Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt.

Me: Well, you're not the only one.

Mal: Huh?

Me: River's uncle Benji just showed up. He seems to want River's opinion on some of his art.

Mal: Benji's over there? Right now?

Me: Yes?

Mal: Okay. TTYL.

I frown at the screen. That was strangely...abrupt, and I don't know what to make of it. Shrugging, I lock my screen and return my phone to my pocket.

As I turn back to River and Benji, I freeze like the proverbial sucker caught in a tractor beam as I stare at the enormous phallic-shaped object on my coffee table. It's about a foot tall, and painted in a psychedelic array of swirls and geometric splashes of color, but it's clearly an enormous ceramic penis of some kind.

"I call it 'Alien Rocket,'" Benji announces, like a proud parent christening their child.

River is choking as he stares at the vibrant neon-hued ceramic cock. "Rocket?" he gets out with a croak.

Benji strokes his chin. “Yeah. I think all this exposure to aliens has inspired some of my recent artwork. But I’m wondering if this might be too bizarre even for my usual clientele. I mean, it is pretty trippy.”

River keeps staring at it, trying to get words out.

Benji turns to me. “What do you think, Spaceman?”

At this moment, I am confronted with a dilemma—am I honest with Benji’s uncle, which might offend him, or do I hedge? “It’s...interesting,” I offer.

“It’s a giant psychedelic alien cock!” River blurts out.

Benji and I freeze. Then Benji turns his head to gape at his nephew, wide-eyed. “What?”

River shakes his head. “I can’t lie to you, Benji. It looks like a giant psychedelic penis. Some size queen would want to buy this to see if they could fit it up their ass. News flash—they couldn’t. That is one massive dick!”

Benji turns his gaze back on his sculpture and scratches his beard. “Whoa. Now that you mention it, I see what you mean.”

He’s only seeing it now?

“But, like, aren’t most rockets pretty phallic, anyway?”

River considers this. “You have a point. But this one looks a lot more penile than most.”

Benji hums in thought. “This is kind of a shocker to me. You know I don’t bring a lot of sexual themes into my art work. I’ve had the occasional critic interpret a piece of mine as having some sexual symbolism, but it’s unusual. I mean, it’s not like I’ve been thinking about sex much.” He pauses. “Okay, well I’ve been thinking about it a little.”

River clasps his hands to his heart. “You have?”

“Yeah. I mean, I’m not sure what inspired it, but I think I might want to get back out there and start dating again. You know?”

River jumps up and wraps him in a pint-sized bear hug. “OMG! This is so awesome. I’m so happy for you. It’s been

too long. You haven't tried again since you broke up with Jared. That was five years ago."

Benji cringes. "Well, that was a pretty unpleasant situation. After everything that went down, I just wasn't ready for a long time afterwards. And on top of that, the fact that I'm more demisexual—which I'm starting to, like, delve into more during my morning meditations—creates its own challenges. I just don't have the same libido as some people. I have to have the emotional connection before the physical comes online for me, you know?"

River grabs him in a fierce hug. "I do. And that's totally okay. Anyone who is a dick to you about it isn't worth your time or your love. You are an *amazing* man, Benji Sullavan, and you deserve someone who will respect you and give you their unconditional love."

Benji's eyes glisten with unshed tears.

My two hearts thrum with pride in my chest. My mate is such a loyal and loving man. I adore that about him.

River lets go of his uncle with a smile. "So, maybe some of these new feelings have inspired this erotic alien rocket?"

"Eureka," Benji says, eyes brightening. "How about if I call it the 'Erotic Alien Love Rocket?'"

River squeals with delight. "That would be fucking epic. And it would be a fabulous double entendre, which I am so here for. Love it!"

Benji's expression softens back to its usual relaxed and mellow state. "Thanks so much, man. You helped me in my hour of need." He gives River's shoulder a squeeze. "Sorry, I interrupted your date."

"Oh, don't worry about it. Family is always welcome."

Benji starts to say something in response when the doorbell rings. Again.

Who the hell could it be now?

CHAPTER SIX



KAI

I grit my teeth. The universe is being a cosmic cockblock to me this evening. My former hard-on has retreated to sulk, and my tentacles are gnashing their metaphorical teeth in frustration. “I’ll get it,” I sigh.

Yanking open the front door with a scowl firmly in place, I find my brother standing there wearing a shit-eating grin. “Hey, bro. Just thought I’d drop by to see if you want to hang out,” he says in a too loud voice.

I whisper. “What the fuck are you doing here? Get lost.”

He stares at my head before his grin gets even bigger, and a mischievous twinkle dances in his eyes. “Nice hat!”

I reach up to find the stupid Santa hat I’d forgotten about. In that split second I’m distracted enough that Mal squeezes past me and inside. I close my eyes, count to ten, and shut the door.

When I return to the living room, I’m just in time to witness my brother making an ass of himself. It almost makes up for his sudden and unwanted appearance. Almost.

With an exaggerated and unconvincing attempt to sound surprised, Mal says, “Benji! I had no idea you were here. What a coincidence.”

I facepalm. My suave player of a brother has turned into some sad sack actor who can’t remember his fucking lines, let

alone his timing. There's just something about River's uncle that turns him into a total schmo.

I feel a slow grin spreading across my face. Watching Mal stumble from his smooth player persona to a nervous lovelorn fool for the first time in his life is entertaining me greatly. As funny as it is, Benji's effect on Mal is telling. My little brother needs someone who's a challenge, and who can put him in his place. He's had it far too easy for far too long—getting anyone and everyone he's ever wanted. He's used to people falling at his feet just for the chance at a night with him. But River's uncle is a whole other world of weirdness. He often does the unexpected, never quite reacting or responding how Mal anticipates, and it's seriously throwing my brother off his game. I know River thinks he's a bit 'extra,' but if that's the case, those genes are not limited to him because Benji Sullivan is a major oddball if I ever met one. He's also not remotely swayed by Mal's sexual charms, which has my brother flustered and out of sorts in all the best ways.

Yet my brother seems to be determined to court the man. I can tell Mal dressed up before he showed up. If he were coming over here to watch a movie with me, he would have dressed down in comfortable sweats and a T-shirt. But tonight he's wearing painted-on designer dark denim jeans and a skin-tight white T-shirt that clings to his sculpted pecs and biceps. He's styled his hair meticulously, and I can smell his expensive aftershave from here.

My amusement fades. *Son of a phaser fucking bitch!* My little brother came here just to see Benji! I glare at him and he gives me an unrepentant grin.

You owe me, I mouth at him.

He nods with wide-eyed eagerness.

I will *so* be calling in that favor one day soon.

“Hey, Mal. What are you doing here?” River asks.

“Oh, I thought I'd come and see if Kai wanted to watch a movie.” Mal's only sort of looking at River as he talks to him. His eyes keep darting back to Benji in a way that is painfully

obvious and awkward to watch. Benji, however, remains oblivious, once again. In fact, he's humming to himself what sounds like the theme song from...*ThunderCats*?

"How are you doing, Benji?" Mal asks, trying to go for casual.

Benji gives him a lazy grin and tucks some hair behind one of his ears. "I'm cool, man. I just came over here to get some artistic advice from my nephew." He reaches over and pats River on the shoulder. "He's a good sounding board."

"Artistic advice?"

"Totally, dude," Benji steps back from where his body was blocking the view of his creation on the table. "My latest sculpture."

Mal gapes at it, his mouth dropping open into an O of shock. "What...is that?"

Benji beams with pride. "I'm calling it the 'Erotic Alien Love Rocket'. Pretty wicked, huh?"

River gives him two thumbs up. "Epic, Benji. Epic."

"Sweet galactic gods," Mal whispers as he stares at it, transfixed. "It's a giant alien dildo."

"Anyone want a cookie?" I ask, desperate enough to change the subject that I might even be willing to let go of a few of my precious confections.

Mal swallows, gaze unwavering on the enormous psychedelic cock. "I'll never measure up to this fantasy," he whispers.

Benji laughs with good humor. "I didn't even realize I had schlongs on the brain when I made it. Must have been an unconscious thing. Very Freudian."

Mal tears his gaze away from the sculpture and refocuses on Benji. He swallows convulsively several times before managing to ask, "You had penises on the brain?"

River laughs like a loon. "Oh my god, this is amazing. Where's my phone? I feel like I should record this for Ellie."

But my brother remains unfazed and only has eyes for Benji.

River's uncle strokes his short beard. "I guess so. I mean, I didn't realize just how phallic my sculpture was until River gave me the 4-1-1. Originally, I just thought it was an alien rocket. Like, it came to me out of nowhere in a dream and I just had to sculpt it." He shrugs. "The Muse works in mysterious ways, you now?"

Mal coughs before deepening his voice. "Do you often find penises inspirational to your art?"

Now it's my turn to choke. What the fuck is it about Benji that turns my brother into a complete and utter fool? He couldn't look more awkward if he tried while he stands there ogling Benji and not even trying to hide the obvious erection in his pants.

For better or worse, Benji still seems ignorant about Mal's interest and shrugs. "Can't really say. I mean, I do gravitate to the male form more than the female, but most of my art is abstract, geometric even, and psychedelic always. But I haven't sculpted in a while and when the mood struck I was listening to Nine Inch Nails on repeat." He smiles. "They had this great song back in the 90s. I don't know if you've ever heard it before, but it's called 'Closer'."

Mal groans and looks like he might come in his pants at any moment. His face has gone a startling shade of red and he's panting like he's just run a marathon.

I attempt to help. "Maybe you ought to sit down and relax for a moment, Mal. You're looking a little flushed."

He ignores me. "Yes," he tells Benji breathily, "I know that song. It's so fucking hot."

Benji grins, flashing his crooked front tooth. "Cool, man. A lot of you younger folks don't know the classics. But that one's a doozy all right."

"It's very erotic," Mal says, his voice going high-pitched at the end.

Benji nods. “Very true, man. I must admit, at the time it came out I had a thing for Trent Reznor with his leather goth-industrial vibe.” Then he gets a dreamy look in his eyes as he continues, “That man knew how to float my boat.”

“So, leather does it for you?” Mal perks up with obvious interest. “Is that something you still find attractive?”

Oh, dear galactic gods. What the hell is my brother doing?

Benji scratches his chin. “Leather looks good on a lot of men—women too—but I think it’s about the confidence a person portrays when they wear it. Can they pull off the vibe? Are they rockin’ more of a rebel Trent Reznor goth-industrial look, or are they going for a leather daddy Tom of Finland look? Both sexy in their own right, but I prefer the goth-industrial aesthetic.” Benji shudders. “Those big beefy leather daddies are a bit intimidating to me. But I respect them and think they’re cool cats.”

Mal looks like he’s contemplating going out and purchasing an entire leather wardrobe to wear for Benji soon. I may have to intervene if things get out of hand.

Trying yet again to help my brother out, I decide to pipe up in the hopes of making my clueless brother more aware of Benji’s demisexual preferences. “But isn’t it the personality of someone that attracts you the most? Not just the exterior?”

Benji nods his head and his man bun wobbles with the movement, causing a few more strands to break free and trail down his shoulders. “For sure, you’ve hit the bullseye.” He gives Mal a bit of a sheepish smile. “I only realized a few years ago I’m what you young people nowadays would call ‘demisexual’ with a romantic preference for men.”

Mal freezes, blinking like a confused space weevil stuck in a trash compactor. “Demisexual?”

Benji nods. “Yep. It means I don’t get sexually attracted to people until I have a deeper emotional connection to them. I was never much of a hookup kind of guy even in my youth. Granted, I hit adolescence during the height of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, so I was a little slow to experiment with my

sexuality. I think a lot of us were afraid back then. But even after we learned condoms could keep us relatively safe, I didn't want to go to the clubs every night and bag anyone who came along." Benji shrugs. "For me, I was more interested in meeting a person who intrigued me on a deeper level, who I felt like I could have a more powerful, spiritual connection with. That's what really turns me on."

Mal stares at him like he's a heretofore undiscovered extraterrestrial species. "So, you mean you're a monogamous kind of guy who only wants to date or have sex with someone you experience a strong emotional connection with them?"

Benji gives him finger guns and a grin. "Nailed it, dude."

Mal's answering smile is weak. "And you're not swayed by physical attractiveness or sex appeal?"

Benji chuckles and shakes his head. "Nah. I mean, I can appreciate an attractive man—hello, Trent Reznor back in the day—but I don't want to have sex with someone just because they're attractive. I'm an artist. I have a strong appreciation for aesthetic beauty, but that doesn't translate to sexual desire for me. Sure, I've had plenty of hot dudes try to get in my pants over the years, but I'm not led by my cock. Like I said, if I don't have that deeper emotional connection first, I sure as shit ain't gonna just jump into bed with some guy just because he's got a good come on and a hot bod."

Mal gives a nervous chuckle. "Haha. Of course not."

Benji crosses his arms, his face contemplative. "I've never understood people who are hardcore players. I mean, I guess they must get something out of sex that is just too amazing to want to give up on the daily, but for me, there's a difference between the pleasure I experience when I have sex with someone I care about and am connected to versus sleeping with some random guy. One night stands just feel so empty and meaningless. The spark isn't there, and it doesn't do much for me. Now that I'm older, I don't bother with any of that stuff anymore. I tried for a while. I thought maybe I just needed to give one night stands more of a chance, you know? But it was always the same. Disappointing." He smiles. "Then

River gave me a book, and I read about demisexuality and I realized that was me. Course, we didn't have those labels when I was growing up. The rainbow spectrum was a hell of a lot smaller back then." He gives Mal a soft smile. "You're lucky you guys grew up in a time when you had more options to figure out how you wanted to identify."

Mal has a panicked alien-caught-in-a-tractor-beam look on his face and I can imagine why. For all of his many talents, Mal has never had a serious monogamous relationship in his life. He is the quintessential player Benji mentioned. I can only imagine how difficult it's going to be for my brother if he's going to court River's uncle. And I suspect he will, because no matter how terrifying Benji is to him in terms of what he represents, my brother gravitates toward him like a planet to a sun—orbiting around him and unable to break free of his magnetic hold. I know Mal hasn't said anything to me, but I suspect Benji is his mate—and poor Mal has no idea how to deal with one like Benji Sullivan.

He's got his work cut out for him, that's for damn sure.

Just as River comes back with his phone in hand and an eager grin on his face, the doorbell rings again.

I throw my hands up in the air. "What the hell is going on tonight?"

River rushes over and pats me on the back. "It's okay, honey. We'll get back to our sexy times soon." Then he runs over to the door and throws it wide open to reveal both of my parents.

I rub my temples. "Galactic gods! What the hell are you two doing here?"

"Don't be rude, Kai," River scolds me before ushering them inside.

My mom squeals with delight. "It's like a Christmas wonderland in here. This is so fucking awesome!"

River preens. "I did it all myself. Doesn't it look great?"

Dad glances around him with a puzzled expression on his face. "Why have you decorated for Christmas in October?"

Isn't that a little premature?"

River beams at him. "It's a special holiday-themed date night for me and Kai. I was trying to get him in the spirit because I was reading him the draft of my Christmas novella for my Tentacular Tales series.

Mom gasps. "Shut the front door! A Christmas novella? How come I haven't heard about this until now?"

I wince. Oh dear. Mom is already picking up a number of River's expressions and they've only known each other a few weeks. Already, they're thicker than thieves.

River grins. "It was supposed to be a surprise. I was gonna get a copy to you once it was done. I swear."

Mom fans herself. "I *have* to know more about this story. Please tell me that Vardox and Starblade are going to have a super sexy Christmas together?"

River leans back, juts out his hip, and puts a hand on it. "Girl, you know that's totally what's going to happen. They're going to have the sexiest Christmas ever."

Mom squeals again. "Tell me more!"

Before they can go off on a long-winded discussion about River's story, my dad steps forward and snatches the plate of Christmas cookies from where River set them on the couch. "What are these?" he asks, his eyes lighting up like a child opening his presents on Christmas morning.

"Hey, Dad! Those are mine," I protest.

Dad clutches the plate full of sugar cookies close to his chest. "I don't see your name on them."

River chuckles. "They're sugar cookies. I made a bunch. You're welcome to have some."

I gape at him. "Et tu, Brute? Why are you giving away all my cookies?"

He rolls his eyes. "Melodramatic much? There are plenty to go around. Plus, if we run out I'll make you more. Promise."

Crossing my arms, I narrow my eyes at him. “I will hold you to that.”

He blows me a kiss. “I got you, boo.”

My dad munches on a thickly frosted cookie shaped like a snowman, a familiar look of ecstasy washing over his face. Fucking hell. He and I have the same damn sweet tooth. I’m going to have to steal that plate back from him at some point or he’s going to eat all of my cookies before the night’s through.

Mom wraps an arm around River’s shoulder as she surveys the room once again. “You did an amazing job. What a fun, festive idea! I may need to take a page out of your playbook.” She turns to Dad. “It’s giving me all kinds of ideas for Iyaran holiday-themed date nights I’m going to create for us from now on.”

Dad’s mouth gives a wry twitch. “Whatever makes you happy, dear.”

Don’t encourage them, I mouth at him. He shrugs and smiles. I’ve long known he will go along with just about anything that makes my mother happy. I dart a glance at River, who’s grinning from ear to ear. Ever since I met him, I’m starting to understand that feeling.

“Oooh! What are some of your people’s holidays like? Do you have a lot of them? I want to learn about *all* of them!”

Mom squeezes his shoulder. “Never fear, River. Once you and Kai are officially engaged and preparing for the Sanctioning Ceremony, we’ll be able to share more with you about our culture.” She sighs. “There are some Alliance rules and regulations about this to protect our people, so I’m afraid I can’t tell you more just yet.”

River’s expression falls but he soon rallies. “That’s okay. You gotta do what’s best for your people. I can wait to learn more. After all, I’m getting used to waiting...” He arches an eyebrow at me.

Mom rounds on me, a determined glint in her eyes. “Why are you making this poor, sweet man wait? Tentacle up and

propose already!”

I cover my face with my hand and sigh. “Mom, we’ve only been dating a few weeks.”

She stomps her foot. “Nonsense. Who needs time when it’s true love? When you know, you know, so don’t pussyfoot around. Make this man yours and put a ring on it. Haven’t I taught you to listen to your tentacles instead of your brain?”

I cast about for some help, focusing my gaze on my brother who continues to stare at Benji like a lobotomized, lovesick fool.

Thankfully, Dad comes to my rescue. “Now, now Ellie. Let’s not rush these guys. They need to do things at their own pace. Not everyone steamrolls through obstacles in life to get what they want like you do.” His tone is gentle but brooks no argument.

Mom subsides, sighing long and loud. “Fine. You’re right. I know I can be a bit...overbearing.”

That breaks Mal out of his stupor and he and I snort in unison. Mom narrows her eyes at us.

River wraps an arm around her. “Ignore them. It’s one of the many things I love about you, Ellie!”

She gives a joyous squeak and wraps him in a tight hug, lifting him off the floor with her impressive strength. “Awwww! I love you too, sweetheart.”

I can’t tell if River’s face is turning red with emotion or if Mom is cutting off his air supply by squeezing him so tight. When she sets him back down, River has a dazed expression on his face. “Okay, not going to lie, that was scary and hot at the same time. You are crazy strong, Ellie!”

Mom flexes her biceps. “You know it. I can pick up Maddox and toss him over my shoulder when I want to.”

River’s eyes widen. “Oooh! Classic fireman’s carry of love!”

Mom grins and elbows River with a knowing wink. “It turns him on too.”

Dad clears his throat as Mal and I whine in protest. We do *not* need to hear about our parents' sex lives. Mom already brings it up far too often. I'm starting to think she does it because she knows how we're going to react and she gets a kick out of embarrassing us.

She gives River a hearty pat on the back. "Be forewarned, I'm going to hire you to help decorate my house at Christmas. You did a great job in such a short time for this date night."

"Which you all are still interrupting," I mutter under my breath.

River's eyes twinkle with pride. "Absolutely. That would be so much fun! But don't worry, I'll give you the friends and family rate." He winks at her.

Mom throws her head back and laughs.

I cough. "Mom. Dad. You guys still haven't told us why you stopped by tonight."

Mom tosses her long, dark ponytail over her shoulder. "We came to see you about some family business, but it's clear you're busy so we'll have to tell you more about it later." She gives me a warning look, darting a meaningful glance between River and his uncle. This must be about family back on the home world. No doubt word about me and River completing the Mating Courtship Ritual has made it back there by now.

I give her a discreet nod.

River frowns in obvious confusion so I hastily try to turn the conversation in another direction. "What a coincidence that you guys showed up now! Benji and Mal also joined us not too long ago." I cast about for a topic of conversation, but thankfully—and I never thought I would say this—I have the incredible penis statue to redirect everyone's attention once again. "In fact, Benji was just showing us his latest artistic creation."

Mom's eyes sparkle with excitement. "Ooh, I can't wait to see it. What is it, Benji?"

He waves a languid hand toward his sculpture on the table. "I call it the 'Erotic

Alien Love Rocket'. It's partly inspired by meeting you guys. Oh, and penises. But I only just realized that thanks to River."

Mom stares at it with appreciative awe. "That is...out of this world."

Benji looks pleased. "That's so awesome to hear from you, Spacelady."

"Please, Benji. Call me Ellie. After all, we're going to be family one of these days."

"My bad, Ellie. Considering your extraterrestrial origins, though, I am so flattered you think my piece speaks to a larger vision far beyond the limits of our own small galaxy."

Mom nods, her ponytail bobbing. "It is the biggest, most psychedelic dildo I have ever seen in my life. But let me tell you, that thing could go for some serious dough on the right intergalactic market. I know a couple of species that would be more than keen to get their hands on something like that."

Benji taps his mouth, a furrow of concern etching his brow. "That would be pretty cool, but I'm afraid as far as dildos go, this one would have to be more decorative than practical, if you catch my drift. Ceramics aren't super sturdy. When it comes to dildos for actual use, you've got to go with the thick glass ones if you want something sturdy but more artistic." He shakes his head. "Glassmaking isn't my medium, though. Sorry."

"Very understandable. Well, if you ever get into the market for making functional psychedelic alien-inspired dildos, please let me know because I already have some buyers in mind."

I groan. "Mom."

River lifts his hand toward her and Mom high fives him back. "Ellie, you fucking rock. I can't wait for you to be my mama-in-law."

Mom gets bright-eyed and wraps him in another fierce, but far gentler hug. River stills, his eyes going wide as he stares at me over her shoulder. I smile at him as his eyes mist with tears.

“Since tonight is practice Christmas in this house, I am giving you a practice Christmas hug from your future mother-in-law. You’re going to be my son one day soon, and I can’t wait to welcome you into our family and be one badass mother to you.”

River snuffles, choking back tears. “Holy freaking emotional overload, Ellie. You’re giving me all the amazing feels right now and I’m turning into a snotty, blubbering mess.”

My mom steps back, wiping at her own eyes. “I’m getting all teary too, so don’t you dare fucking cry right now!”

They both stare at each other, sniffing and fighting back tears like adorable idiots.

In all honesty, though, I cannot wait for River to be part of my family. He’s gone too long without the support network he needs and deserves. That’s not to slag his uncle, but Benji has his limitations and River’s aware and accepting of them. But I know my mom and dad can give River what he lost when his own parents died—the parental love he craves.

My mom is not exactly the most maternal of mothers in the world. She’s not that gentle Julie Andrews/Maria in *The Sound of Music* kind of woman. No, Mom is more like a fierce lioness ready to kill anyone who hurts her cubs. She protects her brood and will destroy anyone who might harm them. In contrast, my dad has always been the quieter, gentler, more nurturing parent. He is more solid, reliable, and trustworthy than almost anyone I know. I want to share them both with the man I love because he deserves to have that kind of parental support system in his life.

River snuffles again. “Okay, let’s change the vibe in here. Who would like some hot cocoa with a splash of alcohol to get in the Christmas mood?”

Mom raises her hand. “Give me a double splash, please.”

“You got the mini-marshmallows, my dude?” Benji asks, looking hopeful.

River nods and Benji gives him a thumbs up. “Me too, with extra marshmallows.”

Mal sidles closer to Benji’s side and tells River, while keeping his eyes trained on Benji, “I’ll have some as well. Make mine the same as Benji’s.”

My boyfriend is soon back in the kitchen and making cocoa for everyone while blasting Christmas tunes from his little Bluetooth speaker connected to his smartphone. Mom and Dad start dancing to the music and River has the sappiest smile on his face that I might have ever seen. This oddly domestic mock Christmas scene is clearly warming his heart.

And dammit, it’s warming both of mine as well.

CHAPTER SEVEN



RIVER

A short time later, we all find ourselves back in the living room, seated and sipping on mugs of hot cocoa with marshmallows—and several with quite a bit of Bailey’s Irish Cream in them. Ellie is cuddling into Maddox’s side on the couch, which is so stinking cute, and Mal is sitting *way* too close to Benji on a loveseat, looking eager but tongue-tied.

Benji sips at his drink, slurping back some marshmallows with a contented sigh. “River knows how to make this the best.” He turns his gaze to Mal. “Don’t you think?”

From the cartoon heart eyes in his eyes, I’d guess Mal would probably agree to just about anything Benji said. “Of course!”

Boy does Kai’s brother have it *bad* for my uncle, which is super weird but I’m trying to roll with it. It’s not the first time a friend has had a crush on my uncle.

Benji grins back and grabs one of the fast disappearing sugar cookies off the plate going around and munches on it with a hum of satisfaction. “You should try some of these too.” He adds between bites, “They’re awesome.”

I glance at Kai, who’s sitting next to me on the opposite end of the sofa from his parents. His expression is mutinous. I will have to make him another batch soon. “Sorry,” I whisper. “I promise I’ll make you more. Remember, it’s pretend Christmas so embrace the spirit of giving just like Lord Vardox.”

He crosses his arms. “I’d like to give them all a swift kick in the ass and out the door so I can protect my precious cookies.”

Ellie hears that and snorts around a mouthful of cookie. “Ha! Kai always turns into a sulky brat when asked to share his sweets.”

Mal stills as he watches my uncle eating his cookie, becoming fixated on Benji’s mouth and staring at it with an intensity bordering on creepy. I’m just about to say something when he leans forward and takes hold of Benji’s face in his hands, stopping him mid-motion as he’s bringing the cookie back to his mouth for another bite.

For the first time this evening, Benji seems aware of Mal and regards him with obvious shock. Mal holds his head steady with one firm hand and uses the other to wipe away frosting from the corner of Benji’s lip. “You had a bit there,” Mal says, his voice deep and husky as he takes his motherfreaking finger and shoves it in his mouth to suck off the remnants of frosting!

Okay, to be fair, I did the same thing with Kai earlier but we’re already boyfriends. Also, dude, that’s my uncle. Talk about awkward as fuck!

“Holy shitballs,” I whisper.

Kai makes a wheezing noise next to me.

Benji stares at Mal as if momentarily bewitched. After a long, uncomfortable moment he swallows audibly. “Uh... thanks, man. I appreciate it.”

With obvious reluctance, Mal lets go of his face and leans back, seeming almost confused by his own actions.

The room goes silent and things get *super* awkward.

It’s Ellie who comes to the rescue, snuggling in Maddox’s lap with a contented sigh. “How about we hear some of this Christmas story? I’m jonesing for a Vardox and Starblade fix.”

“This is supposed to be *my* date night,” Kai grumbles.

“Quit being a grump, Kai,” Ellie retorts. “We’re all here and having a good time. Don’t ruin it. Besides, River has created a perfect Christmas environment for us to spend time together as one big happy family! This is great practice for what’s ahead.” She points at Benji and Mal. “Even Benji and Mal showed up. It’s kismet, I tell you!”

Kai glares at his brother. “Oh, I’m pretty sure wasn’t a coincidence Mal showed up. That’s for damn certain.”

Kai’s brother flushes at his words and I arch an inquiring eyebrow at my boyfriend. He passes over his phone and I stare at the text messages from Mal. I glance up and whisper, “Oh my god, he totally jumped on that opportunity like Fox Mulder on a conspiracy theory!”

Taking his phone back, Kai nods.

Benji leans back on the loveseat and Mal follows his move, taking the opportunity to drape his arm along the back of the couch behind Benji’s shoulders in a far from subtle maneuver.

“Why don’t you share some of the story with all of us, Tigger?” Benji says.

Ellie shoots him a double thumbs up. “See, Benji’s with me on this one.”

“River’s been working pretty hard on this story for a while now.” He focuses his gaze on me. “Since you’re trying to get feedback, don’t you think it would be best to get it from a couple of different people? That way you get a nice variety of perspectives on your work. I do that with my art a lot.” He gestures back to his sculpture still standing proudly erect on the living room table. “I mean, if it weren’t for you I never would have known that this piece was meant to be the ‘Erotic Alien Love Rocket’. Its penile properties escaped my notice until you brought them to my attention. It was staring me right in the face and I didn’t even see it. Perspective can reveal new depths, dude.”

I grin. “That’s not the only time you’ve had a giant penis in front of your face and not realized it.”

Benji guffaws. “I’ve seen some big dicks in my time, real and metaphorical, but none of them have been psychedelic, which is kind of a bummer.”

Mal shifts in his seat, a nervous expression taking over his face. “You, uh, don’t seriously think aliens have penises like that, do you?”

Benji considers this for a moment, stroking his beard. “I don’t think I’ve ever thought about the differences between human versus alien penises.”

“Well, I sure have!” I interject and Kai jabs me in the side, hitting my ticklish spot and making me squeal.

Benji continues, unperturbed. “I mean, I suppose physiological and anatomical variations are to be expected with different species.” He looks Mal up and down. “But you guys are pretty humanoid in your external appearance, for instance. Apart from those hidden tentacles you have, that is.” He cocks his head to the side, his man bun listing precariously. “Are your penises super different? Do have a hidden second dick or something?”

Mal starts choking on nothing.

Benji’s brow furrows, and he pats Mal on the back. “Are you okay, dude?”

“Fine,” Mal wheezes out.

Ellie cackles with laughter before jumping in to help her tongue-tied son. “Don’t worry, Benji. Iyaran men have penises that are very similar to humans. They only have one, however; no double D action there. I have been told, though, that Iyaran men are often more well endowed than your average human male. But other than that, they’re the same. ”

Kai covers his face and mutters to himself, “Sweet galactic gods, why are we still talking about penises?”

I rub his back. “It’s okay, boo. In this crowd there’s a high probability peen talk is bound to pop up in the conversation now and then. Besides, it’s a biological part of who you are. Don’t be ashamed of the peen. Show your penile pride!”

“Kill me now,” Kai grumbles.

Ellie claps her hands together. “Okay, all this talk of penises makes me want to hear some smutty Lord Vardox and Captain Starblade shenanigans.” She raises her hand in the air. “I vote for River to read us some of his story.” She keeps her hand up and continues to chant, “Read us a story! Read us a story!”

Benji lifts his hand and Mal is quick to follow, mimicking his movements with alacrity.

Maddox lifts his hand and kisses his wife on the cheek. “I’ll support whatever Ellie wants.”

She leans back and kisses him in return. “Thank you, babe. I know you’ve always got my back, even when it involves tentacle porn.”

He arches an eyebrow and quirks his mouth. “Especially then, darling.”

She shivers. “Ooh, you were rocking a Lord Vardox vibe just then. Grrrr!”

“Supernovas and stardust,” Kai whispers to himself, “what kind of hellscape have we landed in now?”

I pat his leg and squeeze his thigh in that place he likes, which makes him go quiet and squirmy. “Simmer down there, grumpy pants.” I turn back to my audience, who are watching me with rapt attention. “Okay, so here is where we’ve gotten to so far.”

I flesh out the gist of the earlier part of the story to bring them up to speed and then warn them that when we got interrupted last time we were at a pretty hot and heavy part of the story. “If you can’t handle some porntastic tentacle sex, I suggest you see yourself out the door.”

Ellie rubs her hands together with glee. “Bring on the tentacle action. I am so here for it.”

It’s my turn to grin. I never would have imagined I’d find myself in a situation with what is now a big part of my found family, pretending it’s Christmas in October, and reading them

my tentacle porn story. But this is why I love these people. They get me and accept me—even though I am majorly extra compared to other people, and a lot to handle. They haven't flinched, and instead embrace all that I am far more than I ever could have hoped or dreamed.

I swallow the lump in my throat, getting misty-eyed again. “All right folks, buckle your seatbelts and adjust your pants because I'm going to take you on a sexy tentacular ride!”

Starblade lost count of the number of strikes that Vardox's skillful tentacles lashed against his tender backside, but when he was achingly hard and shivering with need Vardox released him and laid him on the bed, petting his sweat-soaked hair with affection.

“Such a good, good captain,” he murmured. “You took your punishment so well. You pleased me greatly.”

Inside, Starblade warmed at those words, feeling the glow of satisfaction at pleasing Vardox spread throughout him. However, as he came down from the pleasure-pain high, his swollen, aching cock stood neglected between his legs, needy and desperate for attention. “Please,” he whispered to Vardox. “I need you inside me.”

Perhaps it was his imagination but Vardox seemed to shudder with desire at his words. He ran a dark claw-tipped finger down Starblade's chest and through the golden hair on his abdomen, down to the thatch of pubic hair at the base of his cock. Starblade whimpered. Vardox trailed his claw along the length of Starblade's cock all the way to his tip, swirling the pad of his finger in the wet pre-cum he found there before lifting it to his mouth and flicking his forked tongue out to taste Starblade's essence.

Vardox's eyes flashed that tantalizing shade of gold once again. Almost without warning, he pounced on Starblade. “I think you're nicely warmed and ready for me tonight.” He almost purred the words, his expression smug and satisfied.

“Just fucking fuck me already,” Starblade demanded, losing what few shreds of patience he still possessed.

Vardox ‘tsked’ at him. “Don’t forget, my sweet. I promised you I would bring you to the edge of ecstasy many times tonight, but I never said I would let you tip over that edge each time.”

Starblade glared at him. “If you won’t give me what I need, I’ll do it myself.” He reached a hand down and took hold of his cock, giving it a firm stroke that made him moan.

Lightning fast, Vardox whipped out a tentacle and wrapped it around Starblade’s wrist, squeezing until Starblade released his cock. “Oh no, you don’t, my sweet. Only I am going to make you come tonight.”

Starblade bared his teeth. “Then get the hell on with it!”

Vardox’s answering grin was slow and wicked, making Starblade hesitate for a moment. Maybe he’d pushed the man too far?

“As you wish, darling.” Before Starblade could even respond, Vardox yanked him into position and entered him with one impressive, breath-stealing thrust.

Starblade’s channel clenched around the sudden and slightly painful intrusion, struggling to adjust even with all the advance preparation and attention that Vardox had given him. The Masnok’s enormous, ridged cock—even when well lubricated—was almost too much for Starblade to take. His nostrils flared, and he focused on calming his breathing and his racing heart.

Vardox stayed still inside him. He brushed Starblade’s hair out of his face, with one of his free hands, while another tentacle stroked his flagging erection. “Relax, my precious. Don’t fight me. Let me

inside. Give yourself to me. I'll take good care of you. I promise."

Starblade swallowed and averted his eyes from Vardox's too intense gaze.

In retaliation, Vardox swiveled his hips making Starblade gasp as the ridges of his cock brushed against Starblade's prostate. "Enjoy the pleasure that only I can give you. A pleasure no one else in this universe could ever match."

"You...think...very highly...of yourself," he panted.

The smug expression on Vardox's face was all confidence. "My dear, I know my strengths." He swiveled his hips in the opposite direction, making Starblade gasp again. "And I can say with confidence that sexual pleasure is one thing I excel at both giving and receiving."

Starblade froze. "I thought you only liked to top?"

Vardox's grin was amused. "I prefer to top, but I'm not opposed to switching things up once in a while—with the right person, that is."

Ellie jumps to her feet. "I fucking *knew* it!" She does a little dance. "Starblade is so going to tap Vardox's ass one of these days."

"Mom," Kai protests.

She hops back in Maddox's lap. "Hey, I'm still in my Iyaran sexual prime. I want to read about Starblade topping Vardox!"

Kai and Mal groan in unison.

"Er, thanks for the support, Ellie. But Starblade doesn't take the lead in this story. It will happen one day, but not yet."

She subsides with a pout. "No fair."

"May I continue?"

“Fine. But the rest of this sex scene better make up for the fact that I don’t get to enjoy Starblade topping my favorite villain.”

“So, no pressure then,” I mumble.

Once I’m convinced she’s concluded all that she needed to say, I return to the story.

Vardox lowered his full weight onto Starblade, holding him in place and at his mercy before pulling his cock out halfway and then slamming back inside. “Maybe I’ll let you fuck me soon. And you’ll do it just like I tell you to, won’t you?”

Starblade moaned, his thoughts fuzzy from the exquisite sensation of Vardox’s ridged cock moving inside him while one of his red tentacles stroked Starblade’s cock.

“I’ll ride you into submission,” Vardox promised, and Starblade gasped. “And while I’m giving you the ride of your life, I’ll fuck your sweet ass with two of my tentacles.”

Starblade’s cock twitched and gushed pre-cum.

“That’s right. Just imagine two of my tentacles inside your tight little hole, rubbing you in all the right places while my ass milks every last drop of come out of your cock.” Vardox thrust into Starblade with a steady rhythm. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

Starblade bit his lip and closed his eyes.

“Look at me,” Vardox ordered, his tone deadly sexy and commanding at the same time. Starblade couldn’t resist and opened his eyes once again. “Very good,” Vardox soothed. “Now answer me.”

Starblade felt that command deep in his core and could not defy it. “Yes.”

Another one of Vardox’s tentacles began to circle its tip around Starblade’s entrance with each thrust of

his cock. Starblade saw stars. “Yes, what?”

“Yes, I want...that.”

Two of Vardox’s tentacles sprang out and wrapped around Starblade’s wrists, pinning them wide on the bed. “Tell me.”

Starblade gritted his teeth.

“Stop resisting what you know you want, darling, and just do as I say.”

Another one of Vardox’s tentacles stroked his cheek, and Starblade softened, letting go. After all, that’s what tonight was all about. His one night to indulge in all that he wanted.

“I want you to ride my cock while you fuck me with two of your tentacles.”

Ellie cheers. “Now *that’s* what I’m talking about! Make Starblade *work* for it!”

I give her a mock glare of warning and continue.

Vardox shivered with pleasure and increased the speed of his movements. “Excellent, my dear. That wasn’t so hard, now was it?”

Starblade scowled in response.

“I think you deserve a reward for such good behavior.” Starblade whined, skirting the fine edge of pleasure-pain. “I’m going to let you come this time, my sweet.”

“Please,” Starblade begged, unabashed in his need now. The sensations of Vardox pounding his ass, and those far too talented tentacles milking Starblade’s cock and rimming his stuffed full hole, were simply too much. Starblade was teetering close to the precipice’s edge.

Vardox’s hips thrust relentlessly as he fucked Starblade, the ridges of his cock brushing against his

prostate over and over again. A telltale tingle began at the base of Starblade's spine and he felt his balls tighten.

"Oh god! Gonna come!"

Vardox's expression became almost feral, a hint of fang flashing as he grit his teeth, and his eyes flashed golden for a third time. Starblade vaguely realized he wanted to ask Vardox why that happened sometimes and what it meant, but he couldn't seem to focus his brain cells on anything but his pleasure and impending release.

When Starblade let go of that last bit of himself that he was holding back, he toppled over the edge into mind-numbing ecstasy. Distantly, he felt his body jerking with the aftereffects of his powerful orgasm, but he was already floating in a white haze that he didn't want to come down from. He did not know how long he stayed there but when he returned to himself it was to find his body cradled in Vardox's muscular arms while several of his tentacles petted Starblade's ass.

Starblade wrinkled his nose as he felt the evidence of Vardox's release dripping from inside him and down his thighs. Masnoks produced a copious amount of semen with their ejaculations. Far more than the average human man did, that was for sure. Starblade had never admitted it, but he found it incredibly hot, especially in the moment. Not so much afterward, when it was cooling and sticky on his skin.

"I need to bathe. I'm a spunk-covered mess," he told Vardox.

His archnemesis nuzzled his ear. "But I like you covered in my come."

"Bully for you. It's getting sticky, itchy, and uncomfortable." Starblade made to get up but found himself unable to budge one bit.

Vardox sighed. "All right. If we must, then your wish is my command on this gift-giving holiday of Chris-t-mas." Holding Starblade securely in his arms, he rose from the bed in one smooth motion and carried him toward the bathing chamber.

"Put me down!" Starblade demanded. "I can walk. You didn't fuck that ability out of me."

Vardox chuckled. "Ah, my dear captain. I find your human tendency toward sarcasm and exaggeration charming. Delightfully refreshing, even. However, since I was the one to make such a mess of you I reserve the right to clean you up."

Starblade made to protest but then stopped himself. What was the point? Vardox was going to do what he wanted, anyway. Besides, if the man wanted to bathe him, Starblade wasn't all that opposed. In fact, if it was anything like what he woke up to earlier after his near bout with hypothermia, it sounded rather lovely. Not that he'd ever admit that out loud. But Starblade couldn't recall the last time he'd let anyone take care of him. In his line of work, he had to watch his back around everyone at all times. Yet, whenever he was with Vardox, Starblade felt an overwhelming sense of complete trust. The man might drive him mad, might torment him with pleasure until he was nearly out of his mind, but somehow he knew Vardox would never betray or harm him. And while that was comforting on so many levels, it was also terrifying to contemplate what it might mean.

No, Starblade would not let his thoughts go there.

Vardox sat on the side of the bathing tub, cradling Starblade in his lap as he started running the hot water for a second time that night. He opened a vial stored in the tub's wall nook and drizzled a few drops in the water, which began to bubble and scent the air with a fresh, citrusy aroma. Once the water had risen several inches in the tub, Vardox rose and stepped into it before sitting down and settling Starblade in his lap.

Thankfully, the tub was large enough to seat two men of their size comfortably. But given their history, it should have been awkward and strange. It should have been uncomfortable and unpleasant. Yet, it wasn't. Instead, Starblade felt himself melting into Vardox's arms, his eyelids drooping as exhaustion hit him with the force of a supersonic wave.

Starblade made appreciative noises as Vardox used the tub's ladle to clean his body with the steaming water. The sensation was soothing and sensual. Starblade's eyelids soon gave up the fight and closed.

"My poor, sweet captain. I sometimes forget how frail your species is. I must allow you to rest a while before we resume our activities this evening."

"Not frail," he mumbled, and yawned.

Vardox washed his hair, massaging cleanser into his scalp and making Starblade moan with pleasure. "God that feels good."

"I am multi-talented, it is a fact."

"And you're damn cocky about it," Starblade grumbled.

Vardox rinsed the cleanser out of Starblade's hair. "Indeed. I'm not shy about acknowledging my talents or my assets."

The gentle sounds of water soothed Starblade into near slumber. Just as he was drifting off he heard Vardox whisper, "Sleep now and rest, sweet captain. Winter nights on this moon are long, and I have so much more planned for you tonight."

CHAPTER EIGHT



KAI

River looks up from his laptop screen and gives us all a saucy wink. “That’s it for tonight, folks. If you want to read more about Vardox and Starblade’s Christmas sexcapades, you’ll need to wait until I release the novella on my website.

Mom flops back on Dad with a dramatic moan. “No fair! If I had balls, they’d be blue right now.”

Dad strokes her arm. “Just hang on to that sexual frustration, sweetheart. I’ll help you work it out at home.”

Mom brightens. “Hubba, hubba!”

I groan. “Not you too, Dad.”

He gives me a rare smirk. “I already told you, your mom and I like to read River’s story together—before bed.”

“My ears are bleeding,” I say, covering them.

Mom scoffs. “Your dad and I are still in our sexual prime. Iyarans have long lifespans and we still have many years of lovemaking ahead of us. Get used to it.”

River is all smiles. “I think that’s super awesome. You guys are both way hot and should enjoy each other’s bodies on the regular.”

Mom’s eyes are sparkling as she stares at him. “Finally, a son who *gets* it!”

They both jump up and twirl together in a hug. I think I have the same sappy smile on my face watching them as my

dad does. He and I exchange a look of camaraderie and shared understanding. We love fiercely in this family. And I am so damn grateful they have all welcomed River with open arms from Day One.

Benji interrupts the moment when he muses, “I like the emotional depth in this new adventure for Starblade and Vardox.” He nibbles absently on yet another of my fast disappearing sugar cookies. “I mean, the serialized story is great and all, but sometimes the sex is light on the feelings, you know what I mean, man?”

“When I started writing the series, I didn’t know there was going to be such a complicated relationship between Starblade and Vardox. They sort of took the reins after a while and started leading me in new directions.” River flushes and darts a glance at me before continuing. “And, I know I’ve been getting some recent inspiration from my adventures in love. I think this new level of emotional depth between Starblade and Vardox will appeal to most of my readers, too.”

Mom releases him and rejoins my dad on the couch. “Don’t get me wrong. The sex is hot, so I don’t want you to stop that, but I’m also enjoying this new emotional development between these two guys. Your devoted fans have always known there was more there, especially for Vardox, but it was more ambiguous with Starblade since you haven’t given us his point of view. This Christmas novella will take the series in a new direction while finally giving readers insight into how Starblade feels. After all, he can appear rather standoffish. It’s no wonder poor Vardox doesn’t know where he stands with the man.”

“To be fair, though,” Dad says, “Vardox is a dominant guy used to getting his way. He’s not diplomatic or subtle in going after what he wants.”

Mom crosses her arms. “What’s wrong with that?”

Dad leans in and kisses her on the cheek. “All I’m saying is that Starblade is a very strong, independent man in his own right and sometimes he doesn’t want to be steamrolled by

Vardox. The one area he can hold his own is keeping his feelings under sharp control.”

Mom’s scoffs. “Oh, I think Starblade likes everything Vardox does to him.”

River raises his hands. “Now, now. Stories are open to multiple interpretations. That’s what my English professor always used to say. There isn’t one way to read or interpret a story; there are many perspectives that can be valid.”

I reach between us and squeeze his hand in silent support. He beams at me and blows me a kiss. Both my hearts pitter-patter at the gesture, and my tentacles wriggle inside, waking up from their temporary stasis to remind me they’ve been unfulfilled this evening.

I shoot my dad a meaningful glance and gesture my head toward the door.

Being the intelligent and quick thinking man that he is, he catches on and rises from the couch, pulling my mother with him. “Sorry to interrupt your date this evening, boys, but I think we should be on our way so you can enjoy the rest of your night together.”

Mom starts to protest, but Dad gives her a side-eye and she quiets. She points an accusing finger at River. “I better get to read the ending before you publish it online or I’m going to be pissed.”

He grins from ear to ear. “I think we can work something out, but it may involve paying me with adorable childhood photos of Kai.”

Mom snaps her fingers. “Sold!”

“Mom!”

She grins at me. “Sorry. Your boyfriend drives a hard bargain.”

River is just about glowing and looks so pleased with himself. And I realize that I’m truly sunk, because seeing him so gleeful and happy warms both of my hearts more than almost anything in the world.

I shake my head. “I suppose there was no escaping this eventuality.”

River reaches out a hand and rubs my back. “Of course not, boo. I plan to lovingly mock and giggle over your embarrassing childhood photos.” He points a finger at Benji. “Besides, it’s only fair. Benji has most of mine plastered all over the wall at my house!”

Now it’s my turn to grin. “I especially love that one with you naked, except for your red rain boots, playing out in the rain.”

“I was five, and I liked to be naked all the time. The rain was a perfect opportunity to go *au natural*, but I didn’t want to get my feet muddy. Hence, the boots.”

I stroke some wayward curls from his forehead. “Adorable.”

“The family wall is sacred,” Benji says, licking frosting from his thumb all while Mal stares at him like he’s a giant sugar cookie he wants to lick the frosting off of and then gobble down whole.

Benji looks around and blinks a couple of times before getting to his feet. Mal jumps up to follow him like an eager puppy shadowing its new owner. “I suppose I should get out of your hair too,” Benji acknowledges. “I didn’t mean to interrupt your date night but I appreciate your hospitality, and River—thanks so much for your input on my sculpture.”

River gives him the Vulcan salute. “No problem. I’m here for you any time you need me.”

Benji returns the gesture. “Same to you, my young Padawan.”

I frown. “Aren’t you getting two franchises confused here?”

River lifts his chin. “Mixing and matching is totally acceptable when paying homage to the ur-texts that are *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*. It’s all about *how* you mix and match.”

I arch an eyebrow. “If you say so.”

River fans himself. “See, you’re giving me total Mr. Spock vibes right now, which I am super into by the way.” His suggestive leer has my cock rising to attention again.

I jump to my feet. “Thank you all so much for coming. I’ll show you out.”

River snort-giggles and collapses in a heap on the couch.

Benji grabs his outrageous sculpture and returns it to the box.

“Let me help you carry that out to your car,” Mal offers, stepping in to take the box from Benji.

River’s uncle blinks at him in surprise and then gives him a slow, mellow smile. “Thanks, man. That’s super cool.”

Mal flushes about ten shades of red and stammers something incoherent in response before getting out a shy, “Oh, it’s nothing.”

I stare at my practically alien—no pun intended—brother. I have never seen him like this with any man, woman, or extraterrestrial before.

But I don’t have time to worry about Mal and his potentially misguided crush on an aging hippie stoner who is mostly unaware of his interest. Instead, my mind focuses on more important things—like getting laid this evening.

I herd everyone to the front door and eject them out into the night as quickly as I can. Once they’re all outside, and I wave goodbye, I close and lock the door behind me. I eye the doorbell for a moment and wonder if I should destroy it, but then think better of it.

Turning back to River, I give him my best foreboding glare. “If that damn doorbell rings again we are *not* answering it.”

He dissolves into hysterical laughter. “OMG. Your face was amazing just now.”

I scowl. “I do not care to have any other friends or family interrupting our alone time this evening.” Stalking over to the couch, I pull him off of it, lifting him into my arms.

“Storytime is over. I’ve heard enough sexy writing for one day. I intend to have actual sex with you in the bedroom, right fucking now.”

River shivers, his eyes sparkling. “I love it when you get all bossy like this. You definitely have a bit of Lord Vardox in you.”

“Well, if that’s the case, then you’re about to have a bit of Lord Vardox in *you*.”

He throws his head back and laughs again. “Hell yeah. Have your wicked way with me.”

“Damn straight,” I agree.

He waggles his eyebrows. “There ain’t nothing straight about it, boo.”

It’s my turn to laugh. “Indeed.” I carry him in my arms, bridal style, to the bedroom and toss him on the bed in a way I know he loves. He rolls around on the sheets, making contented noises like some kind of cat, all with that stupid Santa hat still on his head.

“You have sixty seconds to remove your clothing or I am going to rip it off your body,” I warn.

River pauses for a moment and taps his chin. “Hmmm, that might be super fun to experience, but I have another surprise for you.” He jumps up from the bed and shimmies his way over to my bathroom. “Stay here while I...slip into something more comfortable.”

With that mysterious and suggestive comment, he disappears inside and closes the door behind him. I divest myself of my clothing, including the ridiculous hat I’ve had to wear tonight. Settling my naked body on the bed, I stack the pillows behind me and get comfortable, lazily stroking my eager cock while waiting for whatever River is going to surprise me with next.

Ordinarily, I’m not a man who enjoys surprises. But with River, it’s different. He knows how to keep me on my toes and how to get me to veer outside my comfort zone in ways that I always end up enjoying. This is one of many reasons I know

he is my mate. No one else has ever made me feel the way he does. And no one else has brought out my fun side, which I didn't even know I had, like him.

I hear a faint click as the door to my bathroom opens and River steps forward to pose dramatically in the doorway. He looks delectable. He's wearing some kind of red and white Santa-inspired lingerie, most likely meant for a woman, but it looks so much fucking hotter on him. The semi-sheer red fabric of the negligee hugs his torso, its edges lined with a feathery, soft white fabric that flutters with his every move. Even from here, I can see his already hard nipples straining against the red material. My tentacles want to play with them.

My gaze travels the length of River's compact body, dipping down to where I see he's wearing a satiny red thong that struggles to contain his straining erection. He gives me several provocative poses in the doorway. "What do you think? Like what you see?"

"Come to me," I say, hearing the edge of a primitive growl in my throat.

River's grin is blinding as he skips over in his sexy negligee and satin thong. He crawls up on the bed and makes his way to me like a jungle cat on the prowl. Once he has his body braced over mine, he leans back on his heels, settling his bare ass cheeks on my lap as he faces toward me.

I touch the fabric of the negligee. "You got this just for me?"

"Well," River hedges. "It might have been part of a costume for a party several years ago, but I haven't had another chance to wear it since, and I think I look totally fucking hot in it." He darts a quick, almost shy glance at me from under his lashes. "And I thought you might agree. Do you like it?" He hesitates. "Or is it too much?"

I hate the note of uncertainty in his voice, so I take him into my arms, pulling him against my naked body. "You are the sexiest man I know. You can pull off almost any look, but I like this one."

“Yeah?”

I lean in and kiss the tip of his nose. “One hundred percent.”

His shoulders relax. “Oh, thank god. I’m so glad. Not every guy is into dudes who like to wear lingerie. Now, I’m not saying this is something I want to wear in the bedroom all the time. But every now and again the mood strikes me, and I want to wear something that makes me feel sensual and seductive.” He trails his fingers along the fabric against his torso. “There’s just something about women’s lingerie. The silks and satins and lace are so tactile. It’s a shame they hardly ever find their way into men’s clothing.”

I reach up and cup his cheek. “I think you look gorgeous. And anyone who gave your shit for liking to wear lingerie in bed sometimes didn’t deserve to have your care or affection.”

River tilts his head as he regards me. “You’re just the sweetest alien on Earth, aren’t you?”

I shrug. “I don’t know about that. But I am the extraterrestrial who loves you more than anyone else in this universe—just as you are.”

River’s eyes get misty. “Oh my freaking god! How do you always know exactly what to say to love-punch me right in the feels every time?”

I can’t hold back my grin. “I know my mate very well.”

He growls playfully. “Hell to the fucking yeah you do. Now why don’t you unwrap your present—aka me—and let’s get down to sexing it up.”

The negligee ties together at the front with a series of white satin ribbons. With a gentle touch, I pull on the strings of each ribbon, releasing their hold on the delicate fabric. When I get to the last ribbon, I look up into River’s eyes. The negligee slips off his shoulders with a light swish and falls into a pool on the bed. River is now clad in only his Santa hat and the satin thong, which is becoming damp with his pre-cum. I stroke a finger down the silky red fabric covering his length, and he shudders with pleasure.

“Fuck yeah,” he whispers.

My tentacles squirm inside me, happy to have brought our mate pleasure, but also yearning to join the party. I let two of them emerge from my abdominal pouch and they wrap themselves around River’s arms, keeping them immobile.

“Now I have you at my mercy.”

“Ooh, kinky.”

I reach out a hand and tuck a finger underneath the strap of the thong resting on his hip. Slowly, I pull the garment down and his swollen cock springs free. But I pause at the faint and rather odd sound of tinkling.

I pull the thong all the way off and can’t stop the abrupt bark of laughter that bursts from me. “Why do you have bells tied to your balls?”

He grins. “Because I want you to jingle my balls. I mean bells.” He reaches down and flicks one, making it chime. “Come on, Kai. You know you want to play with my ba—I mean bells.”

My tentacles lift him up and lay him down on the bed with ease as I shift our positions so that I am the one now hovering over him. “Spread your legs,” I say.

He arches an eyebrow and winks before complying.

I reach down and untie the first bell. River shivers. “Fuck yeah, that feels awesome.”

I flick the second bell and River gasps.

“HmMMM. Maybe I’ll leave that one on,” I say.

“You handsome but evil man!”

I stroke my chin. “Now, let me see if I remember how this goes. I believe Lord Vardox had Starblade suck his cock before he ate the hell out of man’s ass.”

River’s whole body spasms at my words. “Holy sexballs, that is hot. I should have known you were going to re-enact the story!”

“I told you that was my plan, and I’m a man of my word. But, I think we’ll skip the spanking as that isn’t our thing.”

“Agreed. It’s definitely Starblade and Vardox’s jam, but not ours.” He smiles at me. “Awww, my boo gets me!”

My two tentacles lift him up slightly and position him leaning against the pillows stacked against the headboard. I move over to him but realize our height difference is going to make recreating this moment a tad difficult.

River cackles. “OMG! You’re gonna poke my eye out with that thing!”

“Vardox evidently didn’t have such a pint-sized partner,” I grumble.

“Hey, watch yourself, buddy. Evan is the pint-sized one. I consider myself to be a perfectly average height.”

I snort. “Sure. Whatever you say, darling.”

He narrows his eyes at me. “Humoring me won’t get you lucky tonight.”

“Maybe if I hunch down a bit your mouth can reach my cock?”

“Fuck you very much. Release my hands and I can maneuver that bad boy to make this work.”

My tentacles let go and River reaches up to take hold of my erection, pulling my cock down to his mouth more gently than I expected. He holds me there for a moment while one of his hands strokes down the length of me, his thumb circling around my tip. Me and my tentacles shudder with pleasure in response.

He smirks up at me and I have to ask, “Why are you still wearing that ridiculous hat?”

“Because it’s our pretend Christmas date night and I’m in a festive mood.” His expression turns coy as he flicks out his tongue to lick the salty tip of my cock. “After all, I’ve been a naughty, naughty boy.”

“If you need to be punished, shouldn’t I be the one wearing the hat?”

He shrugs. “Whatever. Quit messing up my role play here!”

“Sorry.” I clear my throat. “I’ll have to think about what your punishment will be.”

“Ooooh,” River coos. “That sounds fun.”

“Your story gave me plenty of ideas.” I lean closer to whisper in his ear. “But don’t forget I was born with tentacles, dear, and there are things I know how to do with them you’ve never even dreamed of.”

River pants. “Hell to the motherfreaking yeah. I want *all* the tentacle action all up in here.”

“Excellent. But first, I believe you were going to suck me?”

With no warning, River grabs my hip and yanks me forward, swallowing my cock with a mischievous grin. As usual, he surprises me in the most enjoyable of ways.

Much like Lord Vardox, however, I soon find my partner’s mouth to be so talented it’s bringing me to the edge far too fast. My two tentacles pet the sides of River’s face. His eyes are closed in concentration, but they open, hazy with passion to gaze up at me.

“You need to stop or I’m going to come.”

He drags his mouth off my cock with a wet pop and I stifle a moan. His glistening bottom lip pooches out in a pout. “But I was just getting into the groove.”

I chuckle. “You’re too talented, my love. Besides, I want to give you pleasure too.”

River’s mouth curves up in a soft smile. “Look at my cock. If I wasn’t having a good time, it wouldn’t be standing at very firm attention.”

I glance down and can’t contain my smirk of satisfaction. His erection looks as hard and frustrated as my own.

River's eyes sparkle as he asks, "How about I ride you like a Christmas cowboy?"

My cock jerks enthusiastically at that suggestion. With obvious glee, River shoves me down on the bed and we switch positions. He swings his leg over me and sits down, wiggling his bare ass until my cock nestles between his glorious cheeks.

"Asteroids and atoms! That feels good."

River wiggles his ass again for good measure, making me groan.

"If you keep doing that, this will be over before it's even started," I warn him.

He reaches out a demanding hand. "Condoms and lube, please."

I lean over and grab the supplies from the bedside table. Once he has me suited up, he hands me the lube. "Do you want to get me ready?"

He's learned that I love this part of our foreplay and has started to indulge my preference. My nod is eager as I take the lube and coat two fingers. River repositions himself over me, holding himself up on his hands and knees so I can more easily access his hole. As always, River is an active participant even when I'm prepping him. He rides my fingers, making encouraging sounds and berating me to fuck him already.

But I don't like to rush. When I'm satisfied he's ready for me, and not a second sooner no matter how much he pouts, I hold the base of my cock steady for him as he settles over me and slowly lowers himself down. Despite his eagerness, River is careful and takes his time. I'm not a small man and he isn't foolish enough to injure himself during our lovemaking.

By the time I'm fully seated inside his tight, hot hole we're both panting from our exertions. When River starts to move, slowly rising and falling back down on my cock, I see stars. Before I even know what's happening, River's adjusted and is bouncing away on me, riding my cock like it's his very own 'Erotic Alien Love Rocket' to the moon!

A strange tinkling sound disrupts my haze of pleasure. When I glance down, I realize River's still got that one bell tied around his balls, and it's jingling every time he bounces up and down on my cock. The sight is bizarre but transfixing.

"Galactic gods. We forgot to take that bell off of you."

River grins down at me. "I didn't forget." He rises up and does a little shimmy movement as he slams down on my cock again, sending the bell ringing. "Mmmmm. I like it. Feels even more Christmasy. After all, every time a bell rings, a gay boy gets his wings."

I gasp as he swivels his hips in a move that has me close to blowing my load. "I—" *pant* "don't think—" *pant* "that was the line from that movie."

"Well, it should have been."

It's not surprising that someone like River would be a huge talker in bed. Add to that the fact he's also a bossy bottom, and it's always a wild ride with him.

One of my tentacles decides to get more actively involved and reaches out to coil around River's cock, stroking him with the supreme skill only a talented tentacle can offer. Indeed, the last few weeks we've been together I have been working to ensure he never wants a human man again. My other tentacle reaches down and flicks the bell on River's balls in time to his movements as he rides me.

"Oh fuckity fuck, fuck, fuck! That feels *so* good."

My tentacles preen with satisfaction and continue their efforts with even more enthusiasm.

It's all a bit much for River, whose rhythm falters as his movements become more desperate. "I'm so close," he whines. "I need...I need..."

He's not the only one. I grab hold of his hips and piston mine up into him, taking over. River lets go, eagerly meeting each of my thrusts with needy gasps and moans.

"I'm close," I warn him.

He whimpers. "Gonna come."

That's all I needed to hear. I thrust into him again at just the right angle, nailing his prostate, and he throws his head back with a shout as he reaches his climax, spurting in streaks across his chest and abdomen. My tentacle continues to stroke him, milking every bit of come out of him until he's spent.

He collapses on me, boneless and satisfied. With urgency, I flip him over on his back and he wraps his legs around my hips as I pump into him with desperate desire. After a few more thrusts, I find my own release, spilling hot and heavy inside him. My whole body thrums with satisfaction and the rightness I always feel with River.

For several moments, we both lie there panting and sweaty but sated. Once I regain enough strength, I carefully pull out and dispose of the condom before flopping back down on the bed. River spoons me with a satisfied sigh. "Merry pretend Christmas, boo."

I melt into his embrace. "It was a...memorable date night. I can honestly say I've never had one quite like it." And that's the galactic gods-honest truth.

River yawns. "That's 'cuz I'm awesome and my date nights are epic."

I take hold of his arm around me and lace our fingers together with a contented sigh. "The cookies and cocoa idea was brilliant. I will happily take more of those delicacies any time you like."

River snorts. "You're a total ho for sugar and chocolate." He pats my ass lovingly. "It's okay. I think it's adorable."

The warmth of his body wrapped around mine has me relaxing and nearly drifting off until River speaks again. "So what did your parents really come over for tonight?"

I heave a mental groan. I should have known we couldn't sneak that one past him. He's too observant and inquisitive. It makes him a brilliant asset to the alien Alliance on Earth, but it also makes it hard keeping much of anything from him even when it's classified information.

“They were going to talk to me about news from the home world,” I admit. “By now, relatives back home have heard about us completing the Mating Courtship Ritual.”

River lets go of me and springs up into a seated position like he’s just had a triple shot latte. I give in and sit up as well, watching his bright, eager face. As always, he’s beyond excited to learn more about aliens.

“OMG! You totally have family back on your home world and I never even thought about that. I’m so sorry. I should have realized you would have relatives back there. Duh! But it never occurred to me until this moment.”

“It’s okay. How were you to know? In any case, most of them I’ve only ever seen a handful of times in my life. We seldom go back home to visit because of Mom and Dad’s jobs. It’s a long journey both ways, so relatives have only come here a handful of times over the years.”

“Ooh! Do you think I’ll ever get to meet some of them?”

I brace myself. “Well, once we begin preparing for the Iyaran Sanctioning Ceremony some of my relatives will come to Earth to attend.

River’s eyes go comically wide. “Holy guacamole! It’ll be a full on intergalactic wedding.” He clasps his hands together over his heart. “I wish we could do it on your home planet! How fucking cool would that be?”

I pat his naked thigh. “I’m sure you’ll get to visit with me one day. But the logistics of having the Sanctioning Ceremony there are too complicated, particularly for my family here on Earth. With so many of us working for the Alliance, we couldn’t all get away at the same time for several months of leave to travel there and back.”

River pouts. “No fair.”

I chuckle. “Such is life sometimes.”

“Screw that. I’m going to make it my mission to get there one day. I want to see the galaxy. Having my very own Doctor Who adventure with you is my ultimate fantasy!”

I groan. “You do recall that I’m not a Time Lord, right? I just want to state that for the record once again. Also, they are fictional beings.”

“You shut your mouth. Time Lords could totally be real. Don’t ruin my personal fantasy.” His sigh is wistful. “A boy can dream.”

I pinch him and he giggles. “No fantasizing about the Doctor while in bed with me.”

“Don’t worry, boo. You’re even better than a Time Lord. I love you and your tentacles just the way you are.”

I take hold of his hand again. “I’m sorry I can’t say much more about family stuff yet. A lot of this information has to remain classified until we are engaged.”

River’s answering smile is soft and understanding. “I know, Kai. It’s okay. Plus, it won’t be forever. After all, you’re gonna make an honest man out of me, aren’t you?”

I squeeze his hand. “Damn right. Just you wait, River Sullivan. We’re going to be mates for life. But for now, let’s just enjoy dating for a little while—especially since you’re making it so much more interesting than anyone else I’ve ever been with.”

His eyes are glowing when he lifts our joined hands and brushes a tender kiss against my knuckles. “I can’t wait to spend the rest of my life with you, Kai Genaro,” he says without an ounce of guile.

Unexpectedly, I feel myself tearing up. My voice is thick with emotion when I respond, “I’m so glad I found you in this vast universe, River Sullivan. You are one of a kind and meant for me more than anyone else alive.”

He reaches out his free hand and cups my face. “You got it wrong, boo. I’m the one who found you—and that is motherfucking *destiny!*”

“I think you’re absolutely right,” I murmur, before leaning over to kiss him.

Eventually, he pulls back with a sheepish look. “Delightful as this is, I’m afraid my poor penis is not up for round two yet.”

I chuckle. “Not a problem.”

He repositions himself in my lap so he’s leaning his back against my front. His hand reaches down between his legs and I hear a familiar jingling before he lifts the infamous bell on high. “Aha! This is going to become our annual Christmas ‘Bell of the Balls’ and used as our secret signal for yuletide booty calls!” He reverently places it in my hand. “My gift to you. When you want me to unleash some festive sexiness on you, just tie that around your balls and I’ll know.”

I burst into unexpected peals of laughter.

“Hey, this is a very special gift to commemorate our date night,” he tries to assure me.

“Well, it does come with many memories,” I say, wiping away tears of mirth.

“Exactly. Besides, this is only pretend Christmas. I have all kinds of plans for other gifts for you when it’s the real deal.”

Pulling him in closer to me, I nuzzle behind his ear in the spot I know he loves. “I don’t need any gifts. All I need is you.”

River inhales sharply. “Right in the motherfucking feels!” He shakes his head. “You have serious game when you want to.”

I grin. “Why, thank you.”

“It helps that you are a super big romantic at heart.”

I scoff. “Hardly.”

“Protest all you want, but we both know the truth. Under that grumpy exterior is a sweet, cuddly love marshmallow.”

I gaze down into his beautiful emerald eyes and my hearts pound in unison. Dammit, he knows me too well. I lower my voice. “Don’t you dare tell a soul.”

“Of course, boo. Your secret is safe with me. I don’t want anybody honing in on my man. You’re all mine and I won’t share.”

I pull our clasped hands to my mouth and kiss the back of his. “I’m not sharing you either.” Then I yawn, feeling the weight of a long week settling on my shoulders like a boulder made of sheer exhaustion. I blink tired eyes. “We never got to finish the end of your story.”

River urges me into a reclined position and spoons me once again. “It was mostly just a bunch more sex, and then the two men have to part ways and resume their battle of wills.”

“I’m sure it’s great and I’ll look forward to reading it when it comes out.”

“I know you will.” Now he yawns. “What time is it?”

I glance at the clock. “Damn. It’s already 10:30.”

He chuckles. “When I was in college, 10:30 was just the start of a Friday night.”

I groan and burrow deeper into the cocoon of blankets. “Yes, yes. I’m old. 10:30 on a Friday night feels about an hour later than I wanted to be getting to bed.”

River snorts with amusement. “Okay, grandpa. You are adorable, btw.” Then he yawns again. “But I agree, this has been a long week and I’m wrecked. Let’s get some sleep and we can have super hot morning sex when we wake up.”

My eyes are already drifting closed. “That sounds fabulous.”

Now it’s his turn to pet my hair. “Okay, boo. Nighty night. Sweet dreams of sugar plum fairies, cookies and cocoa, and bells on my balls.” He kisses my cheek. “I love you.”

“Love you, too,” I mumble as we cuddle together and I drift into sleep, already eager to find out what actual Christmas with River Sullivan is going to be like.

I, for one, can’t wait.



I hope you enjoyed this novella interlude between Book 1 and 2. River and Kai's love story continues in *Can't Help Falling in Love with an Alien*. [Check it out on Amazon and Kindle Unlimited!](#) Read the blurb and short excerpt below.

Also, don't forget to [sign up for my newsletter](#) to stay up to date on my latest releases and to access my free short stories!



Can't Help Falling in Love with an Alien (Tentacular Tales #2)

RIVER

Working for the Alliance is a sci-fi nerd's dream—aka mine—come true. I've even won the heart of my grumpy-sexy alien boyfriend. Nothing can bring me down, baby. I'm walking on freaking sunshine! Except now one of Kai's douche AF exes decides to turn up like a bad case of crabs that he can't get rid of. I don't trust him one bit. But I've got even bigger problems to worry about. Like helping some awesome aliens in trouble, and maybe moving in with Kai, who's totally going to propose any day now—right? Oh, and my shady relatives might be hiring an assassin to take me out. So, you know, a day in the life of River Sullivan. I'm sure everything's going to be fine. Won't it?

KAI

Just when we think we have a new lead on the drug dealer targeting extraterrestrials on Earth, we run into a major roadblock. And the longer this mess of an investigation drags on without answers, the less I like it. Outside of work though, things are going amazingly well with my adorable mate—dear galactic gods, how did that happen? But with an ex back in my life wanting to be friends again, and the threat of a potential

assassin looming, things are getting a little complicated. I love River with both my hearts—and all five tentacles—but even I’m worried I might not be able to protect him from the dangers ahead. Also, I need to figure out how the heck I’m going to propose to him. River deserves something “epic,” and I don’t want to let him down. Am I going to be able to deliver?

Can't Help Falling in Love with an Alien (Tentacular Tales #2) is a (116,000 words) M/M sci-fi rom com and the second book in the series. It should be read in chronological order. This installment features a pajama party date that will go down in infamy, inappropriate team t-shirts, a half-baked love poem, more Captain Starblade and Lord Vardox, drunken shenanigans courtesy of spaceship moonshine, unexpected mating instincts, plenty of new aliens with problems for River to solve, and tentacles galore. And possibly an epic proposal? This book has an HFN ending and no cheating. Never fear—there is a guaranteed HEA by the end of the series!



EXCERPT

Chapter One

FutureHusband: Why are you messaging me unsolicited tentacle pics?

TentacleDemon: Just wanted to remind you of what you’re missing.

FutureHusband: I don’t miss your tentacles at all.

Tentacle Demon: You keep telling yourself that, darling.

—*The Tentacular Tales of Captain Starblade*, Ch. 108

KAI

The Tentacular Tales of Captain Starblade, Chapter 132

“I’m impressed by your willpower, my dear Captain,” Lord Vardox said with a smirk.

Starblade lay naked on the bed, his arms and legs shackled and spread-eagle on the silk sheets, displaying his battle-honed, muscular body to Lord Vardox’s avid perusal.

“No matter how hard you try to get the secret location from me, I will not betray the Beninu people!”

Lord Vardox made a ‘tsk’-ing noise and then said in an amused drawl, “Oh, my sweet Captain, whoever said I cared where that ship full of dirty colonists has gone?”

Starblade jolted with shock. “What the hell do you mean? Isn’t that what this is all about? I risked my life to ensure they could get away safely! You were after them!”

Lord Vardox shook his head, a pitying look on his cruelly handsome face. “I let you think that to serve my purposes. I never had any interest in those foolish creatures.” He leaned over and ran a dark, claw-tipped finger down Starblade’s bronzed muscular chest, sending a shiver through his prisoner. “I have always, only, ever been interested in you, my fair Captain.”

Starblade paled, and his jaw clenched tight. “What on earth do you want with me then?”

Lord Vardox chuckled, a wicked note in his voice. “Come, Captain, if you haven’t figured it out by now, I’m afraid I will have to work harder to ensure your body knows the answer.”

Starblade’s eyes narrowed. “I already told you I am no one’s sex slave, and I certainly won’t be yours.”

Lord Vardox trailed a hand down Starblade’s naked thigh, grinning with delight at the tremor his touch elicited. “And yet, Captain, you seemed to so

thoroughly enjoy the tender touch of my tentacles earlier.”

Starblade flushed and thrust his chin out defiantly. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Lord Vardox chuckled again in evident amusement. “You can play outraged innocent all you want, dearest Captain.” He bent closer, running his forked tongue from Starblade’s neck to his rugged jawline, savoring the stubble there. “But we both know better. You want me just as much as I want you. We were meant for one another.”

Starblade choked in outrage. “Never!”

Seemingly unperturbed by his prisoner’s reaction, Lord Vardox stepped back and untied his robe, letting the black silk garment flutter to the floor. He stood before Starblade completely nude, his enormous ridged cock eager and erect.

Starblade could not keep his gaze from the tantalizing sight. His nostrils flared as he inhaled sharply.

With a knowing smile, Lord Vardox called forth his tentacles, allowing them to move toward the prone man in his clutches. Starblade began struggling against his restraints, but to no avail.

“Release me, you evil, tentacled scoundrel!”

His captor could not contain a grin of satisfaction. “I love that you’re using pet names for me now, darling. That said, I think it’s time for another round, don’t you, captain?”

Starblade skewered him with a defiant glare, but he could not stop himself from moaning at the first touch of those talented tentacles on his sensitive flesh again.

“Let’s begin,” Vardox said with a deep growl.

“Whatcha doing?” River asks, suddenly materializing out of nowhere like a bloody ninja.

I let out a far too shrill shriek and jolt from my position on the bed before hastily slamming shut the laptop perched on my knees. “Nothing!”

I mentally cringe. That sounded guilty as hell.

River narrows his shrewd green eyes at me, immediately suspicious. He glances at the laptop I’m clutching in desperation.

“Isn’t that mine?”

I feel blood rushing to my cheeks, practically writing an admission of guilt all over my face. “Maybe?”

River puts his hands on his hips, and I can’t stop myself from ogling him. He’s standing there with a towel wrapped around his waist and nothing else. His usual wild mop of golden curls are now wet coils, dripping water down the smooth skin of his chest. He’s much smaller than me, but he has a tight, compact body that appeals to me on every level. The recent training he’s been doing with our team under Zamir’s guidance has turned his limber body into an even more sculpted and strong one.

Just looking at him, I feel my cock and tentacles throb. I was already half hard from reading the start of the latest installment in River’s story, but seeing him nearly naked and wet from his shower, I lose all interest in Lord Vardox and Captain Starblade’s adventures. The man in front of me is far too tempting to ignore.

A slow grin spreads across his face as he realizes what’s going on. “You couldn’t wait, could you? You were totally sneaking a peek at the latest chapter.”

“I should get to read it before anyone else, anyway,” I mutter. “This seems like a perk your boyfriend ought to have.”

“What did you think? Did you like it?” He leers at me, and then he says in a strange voice, “Did it make you horny, baby? Yeah!”

My confusion must show on my face because he lets out a very loud and put upon sigh. “You seriously haven’t seen *Austin Powers*? Come on! You’re older than me, and *I’ve* seen those movies. With Benji, of course.”

Ah, more elusive human pop culture. “I don’t share your obsession with movies.” Technically true, but I do enjoy messing with him sometimes and pretending I’ve never seen things I actually have. This is not one of those times, though.

Some of River’s cinematic viewing choices are highly questionable. I’m still trying to recover from having to sit through some 80s sci-fi film atrocity called *Earth Girls Are Easy*. River claims it’s campy and brilliant. I thought it was a cheesy, low-budget waste of almost two hours of my life. The aliens weren’t even remotely believable!

Although I will admit that Mr. Jeff Goldblum was very easy on the eyes. River and I agree on that.

My boyfriend gets a determined glint in his eyes. “I’ll woo you to the dark side one of these days.”

On the heels of that proclamation, he saunters slowly toward me, and my gaze fixates on the beads of water dripping down his naked chest and trailing under the band of the towel riding oh-so-low on his hips.

Temptation, thy name is River Sullivan.

“Like what you see?” he asks, his eyes hooded and tone sultry.

I set the laptop aside in a hurry. “You know I do.”

River comes to stand between my legs where I’m sitting on the edge of the bed. I lean forward to lick several of the water drops trailing down his chest. He shivers in pleasure. Inhaling deeply, I groan at the amazing smell wafting off his body. It’s the most tantalizing scent of warm vanilla mixed with cinnamon, sugar, and a masculine base of sandalwood.

I pull River closer and nuzzle into his neck, sniffing the alluring aroma. “What’s this heavenly smell?”

River practically purrs with satisfaction. “It’s my new body wash and cologne.” He lifts my head up to look into his eyes. “I got them just for you.”

With a growl, I pull him down onto the bed next to me and splay him out, leaning over his delectable body. “How did you know I’d like this scent?”

River grins. “Because it makes me smell like a giant snickerdoodle. Duh.”

I feign being affronted. “Are you trying to arouse me by smelling like...manly baked cookies?”

He arches a mischievous eyebrow at me. “It worked, didn’t it?”

Dark matter and damn it! It totally did.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Chloe Archer writes M/M sci-fi and paranormal rom coms with laugh out loud humor because she's all about bringing the funny-sexy back. Oh, yeah!

She currently calls Minnesota home, but has lived abroad in places like Montreal, Edinburgh, and Tokyo. She's hoping to relocate to Scotland permanently in the next few years if the stars align.

Chloe is a fur mama to two adorable Yorkies, Jasper and Teddy, and she loves them in a crazy dog mama kind of way. When she isn't busy writing, she enjoys visiting friends and family, traveling, reading, binge watching movies and TV shows, and practicing her karaoke skills. She does a mean cover of Pat Benatar and Cher, or so she's been told.

For more books and updates visit:

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