



A Merry Christmas for Art... and His Tentacles (Tinsel and Tentacles 2.0 #1)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Dean

When cryptids came out as living among us, there was definitely a settling in period, but now having a loch ness monster as your neighbor and a bigfoot as your security guard at work is just par for the course. Luckily for me, I happen to work with the sweetest, sexiest cephalopod in the entire building. Unfortunately for him, his people skills aren't the greatest. When our harpy boss demands that I teach him how to interact with people, I'm only too happy to take up the job. I can teach him all about the human holiday of Christmas while giving him important people skills. If our lessons happen to look like dates, well... I won't complain. And maybe I'll get those sexy tentacles wrapped around me before too long.

Art

It's embarrassing that my boss assigned someone to teach me people skills. It's also hopeless. If learning how to interact with human beings was something I could learn in a class, I would have done so by now. I'm an excellent student. But hanging out with Dean Miller isn't so bad, even if my tentacles have a mind of their own and won't stop touching him. He doesn't mind my awkwardness the way other people do, and he doesn't mind my tentacles either. His easy acceptance makes me want things that I'm not used to wanting. I wonder what he would do if I asked for more than people lessons?

Get ready for roaming tentacles, a shy cephalopod who's never been kissed, and the human who is all too ready to help him with... everything. There's ice skating, hot chocolate, holiday bazaars, tree decorating, baking, and of course a happily ever after for everyone (except for their rude boss).

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:15 pm

Dean

The large squat white building looms in front of us, the giant CSA letters the only identifying mark on it. We're almost to the door, and James is still going on about America's Next Top Cryptid . He's a good guy, and he makes amazing homemade Mexican food, so his obsession with reality television is something I suppose I can forgive.

"I really think that Cindy, the sasquatch with the blue eyes, is gonna get voted off the show next," he says.

"James, I don't watch that crap, so I have no idea what you're talking about," I answer, then nod my head at the security guard. "Hey, Bob."

"Morning, Bob!" James says, blushing lightly.

Bob just nods his large, hairy head at us as we scan our badges.

James waits until we get inside before he whispers, "He's so hot. Have you seen the sasquatch porn out there?"

I almost trip while walking through the lobby, which is already being decorated with the typical holiday decor. "James!" I hiss. "Geez! First of all, Bob is bigfoot, not sasquatch, and second of all, you know they have amazing hearing, right?"

This time James almost trips, then he stops dead, staring at me. "Shit. Do you think he heard that?" he whispers. "Even through the glass doors?"

James is really blushing now, but I just roll my eyes and shake my head at him. “Just ask him out already,” I say, but James looks utterly horrified at the idea.

“The last time I asked a cryptid out they laughed at me,” he mutters, starting to walk again.

“Well, asking a chupacabra if they really enjoy sucking things was probably in poor taste,” I reply. James was a little drunk at the time, but it was still a pretty horrible pick up line. “You’re lucky all you got is laughed at.”

James blushes again as we get to the elevator, making our way in as one person gets out at the lobby level. “Well you know chupacabra really means—” he starts, but I cut him off.

“Yes, James, I did have the required Intro to Cryptids course in college, just like you,” I answer. “Yet you still can’t tell the difference between a bigfoot and a sasquatch.” I don’t admit that I really don’t know either—I think only the species themselves know (although it might have to do with place of origin).

James just snorts as we reach his floor. “See you at lunch!” he comments before getting off the elevator. “You can help me pick out a Christmas present for my mom!”

I just roll my eyes. James is pretty clueless, but he means well and has a big heart. Before the elevator door shuts, a Jersey Devil gets in and presses the number for the floor above mine. I give her a head nod, moving over to give her space for her wings, and she nods back before burying her head in her tablet so that only her horns are visible.

CSA probably hires more cryptids than humans, so James and I are both lucky to work here—it is one of the premier scientific labs in the country, and it’s fiercely

competitive in its hiring process. It's actually been around since before the big "coming out" of cryptids about thirty years ago, although most people don't know that.

Of course, cryptids weren't always as accepted as they are today; there was definitely some upheaval at first. As people started to realize that cryptids were all over the place and took human form pretty easily, they also realized that they couldn't really tell who was cryptid and who was human.

They also came to the realization that their next door neighbor was a thunderbird, and the nice old lady who opened up her lake for swimming was named Nessie for a reason. Then there were all the wendigos that were politicians, and the mothmen who were ER doctors or on search and rescue teams. Once people found out their favorite musician was probably a siren, it seemed to be the tipping point for acceptance and even fandom (hence the reality television shows all over the place featuring cryptids).

It took a few years from the original announcements, but the anti-cryptid protests stopped, laws were passed, and now people look back on those dark beginning days as a history lesson of how people react poorly to things they don't understand.

Nowadays, cryptids are comfortable taking their natural form, which explains why a very hairy bigfoot is currently our security guard. Of course, there's always some cult who's spouting anti-cryptid nonsense, but stupid people have always existed, and most of us just ignore them. Besides, there's a whole branch of the government that deals with threats against cryptids.

The elevator stops at my floor, and I stride out, swiping my badge again to get into the lab.

Speaking of cryptids... Art is already in the lab, busy working on whatever his latest project is. He looks mostly human, except he has hands and tentacles. It is kind of

amazing to watch him work—he holds test tubes and glass slides in his tentacles, mixing things together and operating lab equipment, while his hands take notes about everything he’s doing. He’s also sort of mumbling under his breath at the same time, totally engrossed in his work.

He’s such a cutie.

“Hey, Art,” I call out.

I really should know better, because next thing I know I’m staring at test tubes floating in the air, one of which gets dropped, and Art is nowhere to be seen, his lab uniform appearing to float in mid air.

Shit, I triggered his metachrosis response. Cephalopods are amazing at camouflage, and Art is particularly shy and nervous.

Which is another thing I find totally adorable about him. Still, I can’t help the sigh that escapes my mouth. I’m never going to be able to ask the guy out if I keep scaring him all the time.

I head over to pick up the dropped test tube, which is thankfully empty. Art starts to fade back into his normal appearance, although he just stares at me nervously.

One of his tentacles reaches out and circles around my wrist holding the test tube, and Art looks absolutely mortified at that. I just laugh, opening my palm so he can take the tube back.

“Sorry, Art. Didn’t mean to startle you,” I say.

With that, his tentacle slowly uncoils, he grabs the test tube, and he makes a beeline for the back of the lab. I just sigh again.

Art is adorable and sweet and utterly brilliant, but I'm guessing my chances with him are pretty slim. At least two lab assistants and one chemist all tried asking him out, and it was actually comical to watch them get shot down.

The first lab tech tried for a coffee date, which Art deflected by discussing, in depth, the effect of caffeine and sugar on lab mice in a study he recently read. He'd ended with the question as to why he would want to consume something that contained "biologically destructive elements," and the poor tech had wandered off, looking deflated. He'd transferred out of the lab that afternoon.

The other lab tech had been human, and she'd learned from the last guy and had gone for the open ended, "Would you like to hang with me tonight?" Art had responded by discussing her inability to hang from anything for long periods of time because of her musculoskeletal make-up, responding that perhaps she ought to rethink her plans for the evening if they would cause her physical harm.

I'd had to stifle my giggles at that response, and I'm still not sure if Art is that adorably clueless or if he meant to turn her down.

Unfortunately, it lost us yet another lab tech, which is why we're currently short staffed.

As if conjuring upper management with the very thought of our staff problem, I hear the voice of my harpy boss over the intercom.

"Dean and Art, please report to my office when you get a chance."

Great. It's really too early for a meeting with the boss. Art peeks his head around the cabinet, one tentacle snaking out before he grabs it with his hand and pulls it back.

I just give him a wave and head out of the lab, hoping whatever Frank needs doesn't

take us out of the lab for most of the day.

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Art

I am sitting alarmingly close to Dean Miller. The couch in Frank's office is tiny, and despite perching on the far corner of the cushion, there are mere inches between his shoulders and my right tentacles. That is not good. Those tentacles sometimes have a mind of their own. They also have a fondness for Dean Miller.

I still can't believe one of them wound around his wrist this morning. How embarrassing.

"Cold morning, huh?" Dean Miller says.

I stare back at him like an idiot. That's pretty much all I can manage around him. Either I'm slack-jawed and silent, or I'm molesting him with my tentacles. Sometimes it's both while my metachrosis kicks in, and poor Dean gets molested by camouflaged tentacles. Because that isn't creepy at all.

Instead of commenting on my profound social awkwardness, he smiles. This makes his distractingly symmetrical face even more appealing. My stomach flutters in response.

Where is Frank? I need to get out of here.

The door to the office opens. He spreads his enormous gray wings for a moment, then folds them neatly along his back. "Sorry. My wings are stiff from flying all the way to Paris and back last weekend. My girlfriend wanted to go shopping again. You know how it is."

Art and I glance at each other. We're both gay, and therefore, do not "know how it is" to have a girlfriend who insists on shopping trips to Paris. Don't ask me how I know Dean Miller's sexuality. It may or may not be a constant fixation of mine.

Frank walks past us to his desk, his wings rustling behind him. He's a harpy. That means he can shift into a huge bird, with the exception of his head. But like me, he stays mostly in his human form. The main difference being that he shows off his wings, which make him look like an angel, while my tentacles make me look like the villain of a horror movie.

"I'm just gonna be real with you. The lab techs keep quitting. It's like our lab is a bowl and the lab techs are water. I keep pouring water into the bowl, but somehow, it's always empty. Do you want to explain that to me, Art?"

Oh, no. He's talking to me. That means I have to say something intelligent in response. Now he's staring at me because I've been silent for too long. Dean Miller is staring too.

"The bottom of the bowl is permeable?" I guess.

Frank points at me. "Exactly. Something is causing these lab techs to not like our bowl very much."

"That would mean the bowl was repellent, not permeable."

He sighs. "That's the problem right there. You're always correcting people, or you're just plain rude to them. We've talked about this before."

Unfortunately, we have talked about this before. But those times we didn't have the "Art is failing at basic human interaction" conversation in front of Dean Miller.

“The last lab tech quit because of something you said to her. Did you know that?” Frank asks.

I shake my head. I liked Julie. Her handwriting was excellent and she never stared at my tentacles. Guilt twists in my gut as I try to figure out what I said that made her so upset she decided to quit her job.

“Every time we lose a lab tech, I have to hire someone new. Do you have any idea how long our security clearance process takes?”

I shake my head again.

“Apparently, I can’t fire you. The board said your big brain was ‘irreplaceable.’” Frank does air quotes around the word “irreplaceable,” like he doesn’t agree. Dean Miller visibly cringes.

This is humiliating. I force myself to stay visible, even though I desperately want to disappear.

“That means I have to figure out another way to prevent you from offending people.” Frank turns to Dean Miller. “This is where you come in.”

“I’m supposed to prevent Art from offending people?” he asks.

“Exactly. You get along with everyone, so you’re going to teach Art how to interact with people in a way that doesn’t make them want to quit. You’re also going to work side-by-side with him all day and smooth over any unpleasant interactions he may have with the rest of the staff.”

Dean Miller chews on his bottom lip in a way that makes me wonder what it might feel like if I got to chew on his bottom lip. This is such a bad idea. I won’t be able to

focus around him. The only thing keeping me from getting fired is my brain, and he turns it to putty.

“I don’t want to work side-by-side with Dean Miller,” I say.

“Too bad. I may not be able to fire you, but I can demand that you do this. I am still your boss.”

That is very unfortunate.

Dean Miller smiles at me. “Working with me won’t be that bad. I can teach you a few tips and tricks to getting along with the lab techs,” he says. “It’s not so hard once you get the hang of it.”

He doesn’t understand. I’ve been trying to “get along” with people my entire life. When I was younger, I was desperate to make friends, but nothing I tried ever worked. People outside my family don’t like me. They never will. It’s easier to keep to myself, even if it gets lonely sometimes.

However, I love this job. I don’t like Frank or the ridiculous grant applications we have to waste time with to fund our research, but the work itself is important. I truly believe it will help people.

“What if you locked me away in a room every day where I couldn’t speak to anyone?” I suggest.

Frank sighs. “For Christ’s sake, Art. This isn’t optional.”

“What if we just did it for a month?” Dean Miller says. “Christmas break is a month away. We could try it until then. If you absolutely loathe every minute with me, you’ll get to take a week off and drink too much eggnog before you have to come

back.”

A month is a very long time.

“Cephalopod shifters don’t celebrate Christmas,” I tell him.

“Okay. Sorry. That was presumptuous of me. You can take the week off doing whatever cephalopods do when they’re forced to take their PTO during a Christian holiday when traveling is exorbitantly expensive and it’s too cold to spend time outside.”

I can’t help but smile a little bit at that. He’s right. Christmas is a terrible time for everyone else to use their PTO. There’s nothing more traditional amongst cephalopods than complaining about Christmas break.

Damn it. This is why I’m always flustered around Dean Miller. He’s not only visually pleasing, he’s funny.

“I would rather work in solitude,” I say.

Frank clears his throat. “You’re forgetting this isn’t optional. I’ll put you on probation if you refuse, and neither of us wants that.”

Fear coils in my gut. It will take me another six years to complete the research that cannot continue without me. Something like probation could put all of that in jeopardy.

“Fine. If I must put up with Dean Miller until December 23rd, then I will.”

Frank clenches his jaw and looks up at the ceiling, even though there is nothing but drywall up there. “That is exactly the kind of thing you can’t say anymore, Art.”

“It’s okay—” Dean Miller starts, but Frank glares at him.

“You’re supposed to teach him how to interact with people.”

Dean Miller shrugs. “We have a whole month to work on it. Today we’ll go over some basic ground rules and phrases to avoid.”

Interacting with people isn’t that simple. I’ve tried reading books about how to make friends, and I only ended up embarrassing myself. But Frank seems satisfied.

“You’re a good egg, Dean. I’m at the end of my rope here. I can’t deal with hiring lab techs every month because Art has no people skills.”

Dean Miller’s jaw tightens for just a moment, then he plasters on a smile that even I can tell is fake. “I’m looking forward to spending more time with Art. Like the board said, he’s the big brain behind this operation.”

Frank pauses and gives Dean Miller a long look. “One of the big brains.”

“Right, but I imagine he’s the only one of us who’s irreplaceable. It might be good to remember that.”

With that, Dean Miller walks out the door.

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Dean

Art spent most of the morning hiding in the back of the lab. Not that I blame him, because Frank was kind of an asshole, and I'm sure that whole meeting was embarrassing. I get it that lab techs keep quitting and transferring out, but really, maybe Frank could warn them or do a better job of hiring people with thick skin.

Not that I'm going to complain about his scheme to make Art more people-friendly, because it's the perfect excuse to get to know the cutie better.

Not that I want to force myself on the guy, but I don't think he really minds my company. Sure, he said he didn't want to work with me and that he'd "put up with me," but sometimes I think avoidance is Art's love language. I know I make him uncomfortable. Then again, I think everyone makes him uncomfortable. Maybe I'm delusional, but I think his discomfort with me is quite a bit more friendly than it is with anyone else.

I pick up my phone and shoot off a message to James that I won't be able to make it to lunch today. After all, I think it's best to start on our little project right away. Art is going to be awkward until I let him know what's going on, anyway. He hates not having a plan.

"Hey, Art," I call out, looking toward the back of the lab. I could go find him, but I don't want to startle him again.

A tentacle creeps out from behind one of the tall shelves, gently undulating in the air as if sensing what's out here. I try not to think about how sexy that tentacle would

feel undulating against my skin. Poor Art would probably be mortified if he knew what I was thinking about. Eventually his head peeks around the shelf as well.

“It’s almost lunchtime,” I say. Then, because I know Art doesn’t get hints, I add, “We’re going to go to lunch together and talk about Frank’s plan. We’ll make our own plan and schedule to follow so you know exactly what to expect.”

Art nods his head, but he doesn’t come out from behind the shelf.

“Do you have a preference for lunch?” I ask.

“Food. At around 12:30,” Art replies.

I stifle my urge to laugh. Ok then, I guess I’ll be picking. I know he enjoys seafood, particularly shrimp, because he’s eaten it for lunch quite a few times.

“Ok. It’s noon now, so we’re going to leave and walk to the local seafood place up the street. They have some really good dishes, and I know you’ve ordered from there before,” I respond, smiling at Art.

He nods his head, takes a deep breath, and finally comes out from behind the shelving unit.

We make our way in silence to the elevators, and the walk to the restaurant is quiet as well. It isn’t until we’re seated and have placed our orders that I figure if I don’t start the conversation, we’ll never say a word before we go back to the lab.

“I’m sorry about this morning,” I say once the waitress has dropped off our waters.

Art’s tentacles are fiddling with his napkin and cup, and his head is down.

“Frank is kind of an asshole,” I add.

Art looks up at that. “He’s right about my social skills. I don’t know how to interact with people.”

“Yes, well, we’re going to fix that,” I reassure him.

Instead of looking happy, his tentacles only droop. Shit. Maybe I’ve misread this whole thing. I don’t want Art to do anything he doesn’t want to do.

“Unless you have a problem working with me. If you really don’t want to spend any time with me, I’m sure we can find someone else who can do this. I certainly don’t want to force myself on you, Art. No one should be made uncomfortable in their workplace,” I say, resting my hands on the table.

One of his tentacles reaches up and encircles my wrist again, and Art looks momentarily mortified. I only reach my other hand over and pat the tentacle, which circles my wrist more tightly.

Art stares at my hand resting over his tentacle and swallows hard. “You don’t have to... I’m sorry. They have a mind of their own.”

I hold back a smile. I’d guessed as much. “It’s okay, Art.”

“I’m afraid that this is doomed to fail, Dean Miller. I’ve tried learning how to interact with other people before, but it doesn’t help. I’m hopeless.”

Ah, so Art’s not necessarily uncomfortable with me; he just thinks Frank’s plan won’t work.

“Well, you’ve never had me,” I wink. The tentacle around my wrist pulses and wraps

around it a second time, and Art blushes. Oops. Maybe that sounded a little more suggestive than I meant it to.

“I think we need a plan. Me telling you what to say and what not to say won’t be enough. I think you need to get out there and practice being around others, both humans and cryptids. I bet you don’t go out much, do you?” I ask.

Since Art is usually the last to leave the lab and the first one there, and since this is the first time I think he’s ever actually left for lunch, I’m betting I’m right on this.

“Why would I go out?” he asks. “Food and grocery delivery takes care of all my needs, and I can shop online. Those options save me a lot of time. I’d rather spend that time working at the lab on our important research.”

“What about for fun?” I ask.

“Fun?” Art repeats, and I can tell he’s utterly confused by the notion.

“Listen, I have an idea,” I tell him. “I think we should take a bunch of outings to do different things that require interaction with others, and you’ll learn from the experiences. You learn best by doing, anyway. Like with that latest piece of lab equipment. Everyone else watched the video, but you needed to tinker with it until you understood it. So we’ll get out and experience people, and you’ll learn how to interact.”

“Go out to interact with people?” Art asks, looking slightly panicked.

“Yeah, but I’ll be with you the entire time to make sure it goes smoothly. And we’ll do fun things. It’s the holiday season, so there’s tons of activities we can try,” I tell him. “And no saying no before you try it,” I add, because I can already see Art coming up with reasons why he can’t do certain stuff. “And no asking what the point

of it is, either. The point will be to learn how to interact. Maybe you'll even find something you enjoy doing for fun along the way."

Art doesn't look convinced, but he nods his head anyway.

Our waitress brings our food over, and Art's tentacle slowly unwinds from around my wrist. As we eat, I start listing activities to see Art's responses to them. I do want him to try new things, but I don't want him to be miserable.

If this whole scheme seems a lot like dating, well, I figure that's another activity Art probably hasn't tried before. I'd be very happy to show him what he's been missing.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:15 pm

Art

I am at an ice skating rink. Objectively, I know how this happened. Dean Miller mentioned it at one of our lunches this week, and I went along with his suggestion because ice is water, and cephalopods like water. I also figured that ice skating was a physical activity and wouldn't require me to talk much.

But ice skating involves sliding around on metal blades. That can't be safe.

Dean Miller walks into the lobby of the ice skating rink. His cheeks are flushed from the cold, and he's wearing a stylish black wool coat. He looks very dashing and handsome, even though we're about to do a winter sport. It's so unfair.

I look down at the bright yellow puffy coat and orange snow pants I purchased just for this occasion so that I would be very visible to the other skaters. The white pom-pom hat my Grandmother knitted me for my birthday last year isn't very stylish either.

"Hey," Dean Miller says, all calm and cool. "I love the outfit. You look like a human candy corn."

Oh my God . I'm wearing orange, yellow, and white, in that order. My cheeks burn with embarrassment.

"I was just trying to... stay warm. I didn't mean to mimic the color progression of a Halloween candy."

Dean Miller bites his lip, like he's trying to hold back a smile. "I love it. Are you ready to rent some skates for us? I figured that would give you some practice talking with someone. I wear a size ten. You just go up to the counter and ask to rent skates." He reaches in his back pocket for his phone and slides a card out of a compartment in the back. "I'd prefer hockey skates if they have them."

He holds out his card to me expectantly. I desperately wish I didn't have to do this. I hate talking to cashiers. I always end up saying something stupid, or forgetting to say something when I'm supposed to.

I wish Frank would have let me isolate myself in a room.

"We don't have to do this if you don't want to," Dean Miller says.

One of my tentacles jerks forward and grabs his card with its suction cups. His eyes widen.

"Sorry! I didn't mean to?"

"It's okay, Art. I was just a little surprised."

My stomach twists in knots. This is not going well. I showed up looking like a piece of candy corn, and now I'm snatching his money with my tentacles. I turn around, not sure I can do this. The problem is that Dean Miller is nice to me. He isn't acting annoyed or weirded out by my tentacles' behavior, and he doesn't seem upset that Frank expects him to spend time with me. He's such a great guy, and I'm so socially stunted that I can't have a single conversation with him without making it awkward.

This is why it isn't safe for me to develop crushes on people. It just makes me more nervous to be around them, and I'm already nervous enough as it is.

“Hey. Are you okay?” Dean Miller asks.

I nod.

“If this is too much, I can get the skates,” he offers.

I can’t let him do that. The whole point of this is for me to interact with people.

My tentacle jerks forward again, forcing me to take a step toward the skate rental counter. Clearly, it wants to go ice skating with Dean Miller.

“I’ll be right back,” I say, pretending that I meant to step forward. My tentacle is bound and determined, reaching straight in front of me. At this point, I have to go along with whatever it wants, or I’ll cause a scene. I trudge toward the skate rental counter. When I get to the register, my tentacle places Dean Miller’s card in my hand.

The poor cashier watches my tentacle with fascination.

“Um, hi,” I say.

She stares back at me in silence. She seems more nervous than I feel. Probably because she has to rent skates to someone who looks like the creature from the black lagoon.

“I need two pairs of skates? A size ten and a size nine. Hockey skates if you have them. For the size ten.”

She glances down at the register in front of her and pushes a few buttons. “Anything else?”

“Uh, do I pay for the skating passes here?”

“Yes.”

“Then two skating passes.”

She tells me the total. I hand her Dean Miller’s card, even though I should probably pay for my things separately.

“Hold on. I’ll go get your skates,” she says and walks back to the aisles of skates labeled by size.

Dean Miller appears next to me. “That was great.”

“Um, I accidentally used your card to pay for both of us. I can Venmo you?—”

“It’s my treat. You can pay next time,” he says. And he winks. He actually winks. I’ve seen people do that in movies and I’ve read about them doing it in books, but I didn’t think that real people winked at each other.

Dean Miller's winked at me twice in the last week.

The cashier sets two heavy pairs of ice skates on the counter. One set is larger with smooth blades, while the second is smaller and has spikes on the toes of the blades.

Dean Miller grabs the first pair. “I haven’t skated in forever. I played hockey growing up, but I haven’t put on a pair of skates since high school.”

He played hockey? That means he must be good at this.

“I have never ice skated,” I admit.

He smiles. “It’s okay. You can hold my hand if you want.”

Was that flirting? It couldn't be. But with the winking and the paying for my ice skates...

He isn't flirting with me, is he?

I follow him to a bench near the entrance to the rink and sit down. I want to ask him if holding hands is a normal thing for friends to do, but I'm pretty sure that would be an awkward question.

Dean Miller pulls off his first shoe. "You can also stay close to the edge and keep your hand on the wall."

"Is that what you would prefer?" I ask before my brain catches up and I realize I just basically asked him if he wants to hold my hand.

He sinks his right foot into one of the ice skates, then looks directly at me. "That depends."

"On what?"

"If you'd like to hold my hand."

I sit there, frozen and completely silent. This is the part where I say something flirty, like, "What if I do?" Or I deny wanting to hold his hand because we're coworkers, and I'm bound to mess this up. But I just sit there, saying nothing.

He turns his attention back to his shoes. I wrench mine off in a hurry while silently berating myself for not responding to his question. Putting the skates on is horrible. They're too small, and they lace all the way up my ankles. I lean against a pillar and stand up. Dean Miller is already walking around, putting our shoes into some nearby cubbies. He walks to the entrance of the rink and turns back, waiting for me.

I walk toward him. Walking on the skates isn't horrible. They hurt, and it's awkward to find my balance a few inches higher off the ground, but I'm not in danger of toppling over or anything. Then I step onto the ice.

Oh, dear. The ice is slippery. Who thought it was a good idea to walk onto slippery ice with nothing to balance on but a pair of thin blades? Dean Miller steps out ahead of me, turning his back so he's literally skating backwards.

"Just pretend you're walking," he says. "And then push into your stride, like this." He spins around and takes one step forward, pushing his foot back with a graceful stroke.

Why does he have to be good at everything?

Other skaters glide past me, narrowly missing me. Unfortunately, my skates have decided that I'm moving forward whether I want to or not. I raise my arms like wings in a desperate effort to keep my balance as I wobble toward Dean Miller. My tentacles also span out, which probably makes me look utterly ridiculous. He does another fancy spin until he's skating backwards again. Silently, he holds out his hands to me in invitation. He's almost motionless, waiting for me to skate to him. I really want to grab his hands. Not because I like him, but because I am not stable. I could crash at any moment. I try to stay calm.

Unfortunately, my tentacles don't get the memo. The second I get close enough to Dean Miller, four of them grab his body and wrap themselves around his torso like a boa constrictor. He gasps for air as our bodies get closer. I thrash around, trying to pull away, but I'm wearing ice skates, and I have no control over the situation any longer. Suddenly, my mouth is mere inches from Dean Miller's, with only our bulky coats keeping our bodies apart.

His eyes glaze over, and he mutters something that sounds like, "Fuck, that's hot."

“What?” I whisper. “I mean, sorry.”

He leans in closer, until his cheek is pressed against mine. “Don’t you dare apologize. I like it when your tentacles touch me.”

He likes it when my tentacles touch him? Did I hear that right? It’s hard to think when his cheek is pressed against mine, and I can feel the warmth of his body under my tentacles.

“Most people think they’re weird,” I say.

“What’s wrong with weird?” Dean Miller asks. “All my favorite people are weird. Normal is overrated.”

He wraps his arms around me. My heart races from the pressure of his touch. I’m completely overwhelmed by him. Then we’re moving. Not very fast, but we’re definitely gliding forward. I cling to him tighter, my breath catching.

“Shhhh. I’ve got you,” he whispers. “You don’t need to do anything. Just hold on tight.”

I close my eyes. Icy air whips at my face as Dean Miller skates backward, moving us from side to side. I’ve never been so terrified. He’s touching me, and we’re ice skating, and I’m wrapped around him like an enormous Kraken dragging a ship into the sea, but I don’t want it to stop.

“Are people staring at us?” I ask.

“Who cares?”

The heat of his breath on my ear makes me shiver.

“Am I bothering you?” I ask, because apparently my mouth has grown a mind of its own too.

“God, no,” he says.

I’ve never been this close to a man I liked. I haven’t ever let things go this far with my crushes, because I know I’m terrible with people, and I hate making a fool of myself.

But I don’t feel like a fool right now. Dean Miller said he liked being touched by my tentacles. And the way he’s holding me while we sway back and forth leaves no question about what he wants.

I don’t need to do anything. Just hold on tight.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:15 pm

Dean

First of all, I had no idea that Art had never been ice skating before. Really, that was total stupidity on my part. The guy never gets out, so of course, he hadn't been ice skating.

It was one of the things that popped into my head for an activity, though, and he seemed interested in the idea, so I figured maybe it was something cephalopods did as kids, just like humans did.

And maybe I had an image of us skating hand-in-hand around the rink. Sappy? Yup. But I'm a sucker for Art (pun intended), and the idea of holding hands with him was a definite perk.

Being wrapped in his tentacles, though? Well, that was a hell of a lot better than just holding hands. I spent most of the time we were skating trying not to let him know exactly how much I liked his tentacles wrapped around me. Luckily, or maybe unluckily, he started to get the hang of it and ended up skating next to me by the time the Zamboni was ready to come out. We walked off together and are currently standing and watching the ice get resurfaced.

Art is mumbling under his breath, probably figuring out the mechanics of how the Zamboni works. It's kind of cute.

"Should we get some hot chocolate?" I ask when Art falls quiet. I think he's fully figured out how the Zamboni works, because he's turned toward me.

“Hot chocolate has caffeine and sugar, which are both addictive. Did you know that lab rats preferred cookies to cocaine in a study, since the sugar activated more neurons in the rats’ brains than either cocaine or morphine?” Art asks.

I smile at him, but he tilts his head, and a tentacle reaches out toward me, lightly brushing against my arm. I try not to shiver at the sensation.

“I said something wrong, didn’t I?” Art asks.

“Well...” I start, but I’m not sure how to continue. I don’t want to hurt his feelings. And honestly, I think he’s super cute. I love the nerd aesthetic, and I love that Art is just himself. Unfortunately, our boss and the lab techs don’t seem to find it as endearing.

“I thought it was an interesting study. Should I not talk about scientific studies? I thought that because we’re both scientists, you might find it interesting as well. Was it because the study involved animal testing?” Art asks.

Oh, boy. I lead Art over to a bench, because I can see he’s wobbling a bit standing in his skates. His tentacles gently hold onto me as we make our way to the bench, and I feel flushed from more than just the exercise of ice skating.

Maybe ice skating wasn’t the best first activity, because I’m sure Art has no clue what he’s doing to me. I’m not even sure if he’d like the idea of what he’s doing to me, and I definitely don’t want to come across as a creep.

“You can take the skates off if they’re uncomfortable. We can put them back on if we go back onto the ice,” I say, although I sense Art might be done ice skating for today. I really don’t want our time together to end, though.

Art sighs in relief, and I watch, fascinated, as hands and tentacles make quick work of

getting the skates off.

I wonder how long it would take his hands and tentacles to get my clothes off.

Focus, Dean .

“So, I just want to start off by saying that I like you just as you are, Art. I like hearing about studies, and I like your quirky answers. I know you’re just really inquisitive and have a ton of knowledge that you like to share,” I say.

“I appreciate that, but I sense that there is a qualifier to that statement. Otherwise, people wouldn’t get so mad at me,” Art mumbles.

“Yes, well, some people are assholes,” I mumble back. Art looks shocked at that, so I smile at him. “And some people just don’t know any better. So, you’re super smart, and humans, and even other cryptids, don’t like to feel like they aren’t smart. Sometimes when you’re discussing technical issues or studies, people don’t understand as much as you, and they feel stupid.”

“Ignorance is not stupidity. Shouldn’t they be excited to learn new things?” Art asks, and I can tell he is genuinely perplexed.

“Well, not everyone wants to always acquire new knowledge. Sometimes people just like to have fun. Sometimes people do things, like drink a caffeinated and sugary drink, just because it’s enjoyable. When you tell them how bad it is for them and give them a lesson on it, it makes it not so much fun,” I answer honestly.

Art looks thoughtful. “So I should not comment on a person’s poor choices?”

I laugh. “Yes, that does kind of sum it up. People don’t like to have their poor choices pointed out.”

“But that could have catastrophic effects in the lab,” Art argues, his tone a little more firm.

“Yes, well, if someone is going to harm themselves or someone else, and it’s work related, then yes, you should tell them, as nicely as possible, that what they’re doing is incorrect and why. People expect to learn at work. But when it comes to fun things, people expect to... Well, to have fun,” I say, not sure how else to explain it.

“But Dean Miller, we were in the lab when the lab techs quit, so obviously these rules do not always apply.”

Hmm. I never realized how hard navigating social situations really is. Different places have different rules, and that’s where Art seems to be stuck. He applies the same rules all the time, never mind the fact that even in one environment, like work, there were work situations and then there were social situations, and a person (or cryptid) was just supposed to know which rules apply at any given moment.

I hum thoughtfully for a moment. How to explain?

“Ok, so when the lab techs asked you about doing stuff outside of work, like getting coffee, or ‘hanging,’ or if someone asks about getting lunch or doing something after work, they’re moving into fun mode. Or if people are talking about their weekends or their plans or their family or vacation—that’s all personal non-work stuff, and so it requires the non-work approach to conversation. Does that make sense?” I ask.

“So what am I supposed to do in the non-work conversation? Just stay silent?” Art asks.

“I guess you just kind of answer. Like if you don’t want to get hot chocolate, a simple, ‘No thanks’ would work. And then if someone else gets hot chocolate, you just let them drink it and enjoy it without letting them know how much sugar and

caffeine it has,” I tell Art.

“I don’t know exactly how much sugar and caffeine it has, so I wouldn’t provide that information,” Art answers.

I laugh. “But even if you did, you don’t have to share it. Non-work or fun situations just call for a yes or no thank you. Or if someone is talking about their family or vacation, just nod along and say it sounds like fun.”

“What if they’re talking about something horrible? Am I supposed to lie? Flying through the trees on a small wire with a harness on doesn’t sound like fun at all,” Art insists, obviously remembering the last conversations about vacations where he’d told a lab tech they were likely to plummet to their death.

“Different people have fun in different ways. Some people think shrimp are gross, or they hate swimming. If they told you all the reasons swimming was awful and shrimp were bad, you wouldn’t be happy,” I say, hoping the comparison works.

Art looks thoughtful, so he must get it at least a little bit.

“Sometimes,” I add gently, “it’s good to try things, even if they don’t sound like they’ll be fun.”

Art looks at me. “I am not putting on a harness and careening through the trees.”

“No,” I laugh. “I wouldn’t expect that. But maybe you could try a sip of hot chocolate? You might even like the taste, and surely the caffeine and sugar will not be that detrimental if you have it one time.”

Art glances at me, then glances at the ice, where skaters are venturing out again. I almost laugh thinking about him weighing the pros and cons of more ice skating

versus trying a sugary and caffeinated drink.

As he contemplates the ice rink, one of his tentacles is wavering closer and closer to me, until eventually it rests lightly on my shoulder. I try not to gasp as it reaches over and rests against the bare skin on the back of my neck.

I'm not sure what sensory input Art gets from his tentacles, but they do seem to have a mind of their own—more than once Art has seemed embarrassed by what his tentacles have done, and I've seen them catch falling things when his back was turned. It's kind of amazing. I read once that each tentacle in a cephalopod has its own mini-brain, and so that would explain why they sometimes seem to do things independent of Art.

Still, there must be some sensory input to Art from them, because as his tentacle gently caresses the back of my neck, Art looks over, his face flushed as he starts to stutter.

Before he can get out what is probably an apology, I look down and place my hand along the tentacle that is lying across the bench, watching as the tip bends up toward me.

I run my hand along the tentacle and look up to see Art looking flustered. "Do you feel what they feel?"

It's probably an inappropriate question. At least, the way I'm thinking about it is highly inappropriate. But Art doesn't need to know where I'm thinking of having his tentacles.

"Each arm does have a cluster of nerve cells that's often called a mini-brain, and these allow my tentacles to work independently. They can gather sensory information, including taste, smell, feeling, and color, but yes, they do export that

data back to my central brain,” Art explains. He’s trying to look scientific, but I can tell he’s vaguely uncomfortable. I don’t know if it’s from talking about his tentacles, or the fact that his tentacle is currently exploring my neck, and now I know he is tasting and feeling my skin.

I smile at him gently. He can taste and feel me anytime he wants, and I think about saying that, but I don’t want to fluster Art any more than he already is.

“How about some of that hot chocolate?” I ask instead, keeping my hand on his tentacle as we both rise up. He still looks flustered, but he agrees.

We walk all the way to the snack stand with one of his tentacles in my hand and one still lightly resting on the back of my neck, but I’m definitely not complaining.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:15 pm

Art

Sometimes, I don't understand social rules, but there is one rule I understand very well: I'm not supposed to taste things with my tentacles in public. All cephalopods know this. People will think we're weird if we dip our tentacles in our soup before we take a bite or graze the top of our pastries with our suckers.

Right now my tentacle is tasting the back of Dean Miller's neck, and I can't seem to control it. Dean Miller's flavor is slightly salty with a musk that's very distracting. I want to drag my tentacles down his body to taste him everywhere, which makes me grateful we're bundled up for the cold weather. Who knows what my tentacles would do if we were at the beach instead of the ice skating rink and Dean Miller wasn't wearing a shirt.

"Would you like your own hot chocolate, or would you like to share mine?" he asks casually, as if it's perfectly normal for a guy to taste him while he's standing in line for refreshments.

"Is it common for friends to share hot beverages?"

He smiles. "Not really."

"Then we should probably get our own, since the purpose of this outing is to teach me social skills."

The couple in front of us leaves with their hot cocoa. Dean Miller steps up to the counter and looks at me expectantly. Right. I'm supposed to order our drinks.

“Um, I’d like two cups of hot cocoa, please,” I stammer.

The young man on the other side of the counter pushes a button on his cash register.

“Would you like whipped cream?”

I turn to Dean Miller. “Would you like whipped cream?”

“Yes, please.”

“Whipped cream on one, but not the other,” I tell the cashier.

He pushes a few more buttons, and I hand my card to him. The whole interaction is over quickly. The guy slides two hot paper cups with black lids across the counter, and we’re on our way.

“Very smooth. You didn’t even lecture me on how bad whipped cream is for my health,” Dean Miller says.

“You said I shouldn’t. The hot cocoa is fun, so it wouldn’t be appropriate for me to discuss the heightened risk of heart disease, diabetes, and weight gain in people who consume high-fat dairy products.”

He holds up his hot cocoa and knocks it against mine. “Exactly. Cheers.”

“I thought cheers was reserved for alcoholic beverages?”

“It probably is. But saying cheers is fun, so…” he waits for me to finish the sentence.

“So I should just say cheers back?” I guess.

“Exactly.”

I knock my cup against his experimentally. It's uncomfortably hot against my gloves, and I don't want to carry it anymore.

"Would it be rude to throw my hot cocoa away now?" I ask. "It's burning me."

Dean Miller takes my cup in his other hand. "I'll carry it until it's cooler."

"But then it will burn you."

He shrugs. "I'll live. What do you say we watch a movie or something at my place?"

Dean Miller is inviting me to his apartment? If it were under any other circumstances, I would say yes, but he's only here with me because of a work assignment.

"I don't think you need to prepare me for social gatherings at a coworker's house," I say. "I'm not usually invited."

He considers me for a moment. "I don't think that's true. I've seen people try to invite you to things. But this wouldn't need to be a lesson. We could just spend time together for fun."

I stop myself from asking a myriad of questions, like whether he would actually have fun spending time with me, or when he saw someone inviting me somewhere. When people want to do something with me, I think I ask too many questions, and that often leads to them quitting their jobs or being very angry with me. I don't want to cause problems like that right now.

"Yes. I would like to watch a movie or something at your place," I say.

He smiles and looks me up and down. "Okay. Let's go."

People, in general, do not look at me in that fashion. It feels like the winking. If I'm not mistaken, Dean Miller is flirting with me. I wasn't sure before, but there have been multiple instances of suspiciously nice behavior, not to mention the way he continually tolerates my tentacle resting along the back of his neck.

"Dean Miller, are we... performing a mating ritual?" I ask.

He tries to hold back a laugh, but is unsuccessful. "What?"

"Human beings perform a set of rituals prior to mating. In American culture, they share a meal or beverage before initiating foreplay that sometimes leads to mating. Are we performing a mating ritual right now?"

Dean Miller bites his bottom lip and shoots me this mischievous look that is not a clear answer to my question one way or another. "Um, that is a very direct question."

"Yes. Is it inappropriate for me to ask a direct question about what we're doing?"

His eyes soften. "No, Art. It isn't. In fact, it's kind of refreshing."

That still isn't an answer. It's all so frustrating. I desperately want to understand what I'm doing here with Dean Miller so I don't mess this up the way I mess up everything, but he won't tell me what's really going on.

"What if I did want this to be a... mating ritual, for lack of a better term?" Dean Miller asks.

"Why is that not a good term?"

"It just makes us sound like animals," he says.

“Homosapiens are animals. They’re a type of primate. I’m also a cephalopod, which is a type of mollusk?—”

He sets our hot cocoas down on a table near the entrance and grabs my hands. His fingers feel warmer than the hot cocoa, even with the barrier of my gloves. “Yes, I would like to perform a mating ritual with you.”

It’s a lot to have Dean Miller looking into my eyes and holding my hands while he says something like that. His words make my stomach fill with butterflies.

“Is that okay?” he asks.

“Yes,” I answer immediately, even though I’ve never performed a mating ritual before.

“Good.” He releases my hands and reaches for our hot cocoas, which is a relief in some ways. I’ve never liked direct eye contact. I miss the pressure of his hand, though. Just before he starts walking again, he holds out his elbow expectantly. Before I get a chance to react, one of my tentacles winds itself around his arm. His eyes burn into mine, and for a moment, I understand what he means by not wanting to label whatever this is as animalistic behavior. It feels too special for that.

People stare at my tentacle wrapped around his arm as we walk out into the cold, but Dean Miller doesn’t seem to mind. The stares continue on the sidewalk and at the crosswalk. I feel my metachrosis response kicking in. I can’t help it. I desperately hope Dean Miller doesn’t notice. But then he glances over at me. I watch his face closely. I highly doubt it’s polite for someone to physically disappear when they’re involved in a mating ritual with someone. To make matters worse, my tentacle coils tighter around his arm.

“It’s okay, Art. My apartment is just another block from here.”

His voice is deep and soothing. A part of me wants to shift completely into my cephalopod form and crawl on his back so I can completely disappear. But that would be too weird, and I paid a lot of money for this coat. I can't abandon it on the side of the road like a cephalopod kid on their first day of kindergarten.

Dean Miller takes a sip of his hot cocoa. "This is really good. You should try yours. It will warm you up." He holds out my drink.

I take it from him gingerly. If we are performing a mating ritual, I'm fairly certain I need to drink a beverage. That's part of the ritual. I bring the steaming cup to my mouth and take a drink. It's hot and sinfully sweet.

"What do you think?" he asks.

"I can understand why it's addictive."

"Is that your way of admitting that it's delicious?" He doesn't look at me while he asks the question, which is a relief, since I'm actively trying to blend into my environment.

"Maybe," I say.

He smiles and turns toward a yellow brick building with a dark wooden front door. "This is me."

I wait as he pulls out his key and unlocks the deadbolt. The hallway inside has worn carpet and the paint is a little banged up, but overall it isn't bad for a human dwelling. Cephalopod shifters normally pursue careers in finance, so we don't have to live in places like this. Dean Miller walks down a hallway of doors to the last one on the right. A worn mat says, "Welcome" in black cursive letters.

Cephalopod shifters also don't have doormats that welcome strangers inside.

"I don't know what kind of movies you like," he says, unlocking yet another deadbolt. His door opens right into the small kitchen with a countertop that doubles as a table, judging by the two stools tucked into it and the lack of a kitchen table. The living room is tiny as well but has a large window leading out onto a patio.

"I rarely watch television. It has a negative impact on cognitive function," I tell him before realizing watching television is probably a "fun" activity. "But it's fine if you want to sacrifice your cognitive function to have fun."

Dean Miller lets out a breathy laugh. "If it makes you feel any better, pretending to watch a movie is a common mating ritual."

I feel my cheeks grow hot. "You mean..."

Dean Miller steps closer, until our faces are only a few inches apart. "People usually put on a movie when they want to cuddle with someone or kiss them."

"Why don't they just say so?" I ask.

"Dating is a dance, Art. Just like male birds who display their plume of feathers or penguins who give their crush a pebble. I'm hoping this dance will get me closer to you." He says that, but then he steps away and heads for the scuffed up couch in the living room, removing his coat and hat. He sits down and stares up at me expectantly. "Come sit with me."

This seems so easy for him. He's probably brought back dozens, if not hundreds, of guys to his place. That scares me a little bit. If we kiss or do something more than that, it would be special to me. I don't let people get this close. However, I'm not sure it would be special for Dean Miller. He'd be nice afterwards, because that's how he

is, but I don't think he'd take it very seriously.

Maybe that's okay. If I took physical closeness less seriously, I probably wouldn't still be a virgin.

I remove my hat and unwind my scarf slowly. I take my coat off next and pause before removing my shoes. Dean Miller is still wearing his. That probably means he expects me to as well. Cephalopod shifters never wear shoes in the house. That makes me worry there are other things I'm supposed to do or not do that I'm not aware of. I walk toward his couch and sit at the edge, hoping I haven't messed up in some way.

"Thank you for coming home with me," he says.

"I didn't do it as a favor. I wanted to," I assure him.

He smiles. "Good."

My tentacles slither across the cushion between us. One of them slides across his shoulders, and another rests on his knee.

"Sorry," I say.

He places his hand on the one covering his knee, maintaining eye contact with me the whole time. "You don't need to be sorry."

Suddenly, I understand the need for a movie or something to draw attention away from how awkward this is.

"I like mysteries," I tell him. "It's enjoyable to guess who did it. I also like movies with Timothee Chalamet. I find him visually pleasing."

He does this thing between a laugh and a cough. “Okay. Can’t argue there.” He sets down his hot chocolate and reaches for the remote. My tentacle winds around his other hand. For the first time, I’m relieved that I can’t stop them. I enjoy the taste of Dean Miller’s skin, and I would never have the courage to come on to him on my own.

“We don’t need to watch a movie,” he says, turning back to me.

“I thought we were dancing?”

He nods. “I think we still are.” He lifts his hand that’s currently wrapped in my tentacle and slowly brings it to his mouth. I hold my breath as he brushes his lips against my skin. “You are so sexy.”

Just like on the ice, the rest of my tentacles wrap themselves around him. The only difference is that I want them to this time. I’m not embarrassed. Not when Dean Miller looks at me like that and calls me sexy. There’s no coat between us this time, just a thin layer of fabric.

“Fuck, Art. That’s just...” he trails off, like he doesn’t have a word for how much he likes being wrapped up in me.

My tentacles wind tighter around him, bringing him in closer. He watches them with an awe that makes all my anxiety melt away. A man has never reacted to me this way before. It makes me feel reckless. Dean Miller said this was a mating ritual, didn’t he? That means we get to kiss, doesn’t it?

Our knees press together. We’re close enough that I can feel his breath on my lips. He’s the one who closes the gap. His lips are warm and wonderfully soft. He kisses me so gently, it’s easy to believe that this is special to him. The kiss deepens naturally, our mouths opening together. The heat of his tongue in my mouth sends a

shock of pleasure through my whole body. The intensity of it is too much. I take in a sharp breath.

He pulls away and looks into my eyes. “Are you okay?”

“Yes. Can we do that again?”

He grins at me. I can almost feel his happiness in my own body, that’s how connected we are. He kisses me harder this time, spearing his tongue in my mouth with a confidence that leaves me breathless. I taste him everywhere—his mouth on mine, his salty skin under my suckers. Not just his neck, because one of my tentacles has slid up his shirt, and I can taste his bare back. He moans at the contact, and I can feel the sound of it to my core. He grabs the back of my head with his hand and devours me. I feel myself grow hard, and I wonder if he is too, but I’m not sure if that’s the kind of thing I’m allowed to ask.

I want to drag my tentacles down his back with the suckers latched to his skin. That’s something cephalopod shifters do to each other when they kiss. How would Dean Miller react to something like that? Should I ask? If I don’t, my tentacles might do it on their own.

I pull away from him all at once, my tentacles retreating. They don’t want to do something without his consent either. At least that’s something we can all agree on.

Dean looks back at me in a daze. “Is everything okay?”

“Yes, it’s just... I want to do things I need consent for. Particularly with my suckers. They would like to mark you. They do that by dragging the rough part of their suction cups against your skin. It shouldn’t hurt much?—”

“I consent,” Dean says. “Enthusiastically.”

“It will leave a mark,” I warn him.

“That’s fine.”

“But aren’t you worried?—”

“Art, I will tell you if you do anything I don’t like. I promise. But I am absolutely certain I will like what you just described.” He starts kissing me again, just as desperately as before. Only this time, his mouth moves to my cheek, then my jaw, and lower to my neck. With his mouth, he sucks on my skin, the way my suckers want to latch on to him. I allow myself to wind around him, all my tentacles sliding underneath his shirt this time.

“Fuck, yes,” he hisses and sucks on my neck harder. He must be leaving a mark too, so it’s probably okay for me to do the same. I let my suckers latch on to his skin, just with one tentacle at first. He moans, his voice vibrating against my neck, but he doesn’t stop. I drag my suction cups down the skin of his smooth back, savoring the flavor of him, allowing my suckers to clamp onto him with a possessive grip. He cries out, biting down on my skin. The pain makes me rock hard.

He pulls off and shakes his head. “Sorry. I... wasn’t prepared for... Oh my God, Art. That was... wow.”

“Wow, as in good?” I ask.

“Wow, as in, I need to slow down. How about we watch a movie?”

My heart sinks. I really enjoyed that, but I guess I came on too strong. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t you dare apologize. That was hotter than hell. But unless you want me to come in my pants, I need a break.”

I get the impression that asking Dean Miller to come in his pants is one of those things I shouldn't say out loud. I would love to see the way his face looks while he orgasms. Especially if I was the one who made him come.

I guess I'll have to wait.

“Okay. We can watch a movie.”

This is all a dance, like Dean Miller said. A mating ritual. That must mean we'll get to the orgasms later.

He grabs the remote and turns the TV on.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:15 pm

Dean

We sit on the couch as I flip through streaming channels, and I'm hyper-aware of Art next to me, his tentacle lightly resting against me, his thigh pressing against mine.

I don't know if I'll survive a movie without demanding he wrap me up and attach those suckers to every part of me.

But I can do this. I can move slowly. I can give Art time to get used to the idea of us being intimate. I will not rush him.

I just keep telling myself that, but my dick has other ideas.

We need a distraction. I click on a service and flick through some options, asking, "Anything in particular you want to watch?"

"I do not watch much television. I find reading to be a better way of acquiring information," Art states.

I should've guessed that would be his answer. "Does anything look interesting?" I ask.

He points to an old television show that was around before cryptids came out. "What is that one? I was not aware that vampire slaying was considered a field of study or a job choice."

I try not to laugh, because I don't want Art to think I'm laughing at him. "Um, no.

Buffy started before cryptids came out, and then they stuck with the world building. It's not based in reality," I answer.

"Ah, it conveys what humans thought of cryptids before they were public. It would be interesting to see how vampires were portrayed before humans understood the reality of the situation," Art answers.

I give a shrug and hit play. It ends up starting on a random episode and not on episode one—I admit I might have binge watched it a few months ago when I had the flu.

I should probably encourage Art not to talk through the whole episode, but his comments are too amusing, and I love how he views things. Watching Buffy with him is a lot of fun. When the episode is over, he looks at me, perplexed.

"I do not understand why vampires would kill humans. It makes no logical sense for them to sacrifice their food source when it is unnecessary. It would be like killing a sheep after you took the wool. The sheep will produce more wool, and thus it is more lucrative to keep it alive. It is also highly judgemental that they classify all vampires as evil. Their portrayal of witches is also strange. And surely such a thing as a 'hellmouth' has never existed," he says, staring at me.

I try to focus on what he's saying, I really do, and I did a great job through most of the show, but his tentacles are wandering again now that he isn't focused on the show. One is gently kneading my thigh, and another is resting along the back of my neck, and I can feel his suckers gently latching and unlatching against my skin.

"Um, yeah, it's fiction. No one took it as real at the time, and no one thought vampires really existed," I say, barely suppressing a groan as I finish my sentence.

Art seems to notice, because his tentacles stop their motion, although he doesn't

move them.

“Have we reached the part of the dance where we are able to achieve mutually beneficial pleasure with one another?” Art asks, and I swear the innocent look on his face only makes the question that much hotter.

“Fuck, Art, you’re killing me,” I murmur.

He looks surprised at that. “That is certainly not my intention,” he states stiffly, and his tentacles start to withdraw.

I grab onto the one on my thigh, holding it in place and taking a deep breath. Words. Words are good. I can use my words to reassure Art.

“Not literally, Art. In a good way. Hasn’t anyone ever said that to you during... ah, intimate moments?” I ask.

Art shakes his head, and I wonder if most cephalopods are as literal as Art. I don’t know if he actually has any experience with a human or not.

“Have you ever been intimate with a human before?” I ask gently, stroking his tentacle on my thigh. It starts to gently knead the fabric of my pants again, and the one against my neck, which has been still, tightens slightly against my skin.

“I have never had an intimate encounter before,” Art explains.

“With a human?” I clarify, because surely...

“With a human or cryptid. Is this the part of the dance where we give each other orgasms? I am very much looking forward to that,” he states.

Holy shit. Art has never had sex before.

He leans back then, his face scrunching up a bit in thought, his tentacles stilling. “I am unsure how mating practices among humans are carried out. I have watched pornography for research purposes, but I do not think it is always an accurate portrayal of mating customs. I am unsure how to proceed in this situation,” he admits.

“You want to proceed?” I ask, a little breathless.

“Oh,, yes, I very much would like to proceed, but I am unsure of the correct course of action,” Art admits, and his tentacles squeeze tightly around both my thigh and the back of my neck, sending shivers coursing through my body. He looks embarrassed and goes to pull away, the suckers on the back of my neck making little sounds as they pop off my skin. I can’t help it, I groan. I didn’t realize my neck was such an erogenous zone.

“Good,” I murmur, reaching out and stroking his tentacles, following one up to his torso and stroking that as well. “I mean,” I add, “good that you want to proceed. Because so do I. And there is no correct course of action when it comes to intimacy. We just... we do what feels good. There’s no right or wrong. But that means we have to talk to one another and say if we don’t like something. So if I touch you in a way that you don’t like, you have to tell me.”

“I cannot imagine that there is any touching from you I would not like, Dean Miller.”

I smile at his use of my full name while we’re talking about sex. “Same for me,” I admit. “I like all your touches.”

“Even my... even my tentacles?” he asks unsurely. “Because they might...” he trails off, embarrassed.

I groan, thinking about what they ‘might’ do. “Yes, please,” I say. “I would like your tentacles on every part of me, Art. In every part of me. I think your tentacles are sexy as hell, just like you, and I can promise you that if I don’t like something, I will tell you. But I’m pretty sure I will like just about anything your tentacles do to me.”

With that, I lean forward and kiss him, because I can tell I’m going to have to take the lead here, and I don’t mind that one bit.

We start off slowly, pressing our lips together, our mouths opening and our tongues gently touching. It doesn’t take much for Art’s tentacles to pull me in closer, though, until I’m on his lap. One traces up under my shirt onto my back, and the suckers latch on, providing an amazing sensation like he’s sucking on my skin in a million spots.

I can’t control the moan that falls from my lips, and I don’t even try. I do need to feel his skin though, so I mumble out, “Too many clothes. Off.”

It’s not that great when it comes to using my words, but Art doesn’t seem to mind, because his tentacles and hands end up stripping off my shirt and his shirt. I unbuckle my pants and reach to unbuckle his, but his mouth is back on mine then, and we’re both groaning as we kiss.

His tentacles have totally surrounded me and pulled me in close, and the tip of one reaches around and latches onto my nipple. I pull back, gasping. “Holy fuck,” I cry out as it pulls off with a pop.

“Is ‘holy fuck’ a positive reaction?” Art asks.

“God, yes,” I say, and his tentacle latches onto my nipple again, the tip of another one reaching around to my other nipple. “Fuck, Art, that feels so good.”

“You taste delicious, Dean,” he murmurs.

I have a moment to think about him finally using just my first name, and then another moment to think about the fact that he is tasting me, which is hot as hell, and then both suckers are plucking at my nipples, and all I can do is groan in ecstasy.

I somehow manage to lift my hands and rub against his chest, finding one of his nipples to rub and pluck.

“Oh,” Art breathes out with a sigh of pleasure. “Yes, that is holy fuck,” he murmurs.

I laugh a little, and then we’re kissing again, our chests pressed together, and a tentacle is inching its way down the back of my pants.

“Oh, god, yes, Art,” I murmur as his tentacle reaches my ass, gently caressing it. I can’t help imagining his tentacles around my dick and in my ass, and I groan again, panting against his mouth.

“You like this, Dean?” he asks, and I’m happy to note he’s breathless as well. “You taste so good. I cannot help but wonder how you taste everywhere.”

“Art, you can taste me anywhere you want to. Please,” I murmur against his lips, and then I trace my lips down and suck on his neck, making him arch his back. Our cocks rub together with the movement, and we both moan.

I manage to reach down and free myself from my pants, and then I reach into Art’s pants, freeing his own erection. He’s thick and hot and hard in my hand, and his head falls back against the couch as I grab onto his dick.

“Dean!” he cries out, and his hands still, but his tentacles seem to get more frenzied. The one in my pants reaches down to my hole, and I am so fucking grateful right now that I didn’t wear tight pants. Another tentacle reaches down and wraps around my dick, making my own hand useless. I can barely focus, the pleasure is so intense.

Art's tentacle is gently pressing against my hole, and although he doesn't enter me, the feeling is amazing. Another one is coiled around my cock, and holy shit, he latches his suckers on, and it's like a dozen little mouths all along my dick, sucking.

"Art!" I cry out.

Precum leaks out of my dick, and the tentacle tip dips into it. It's like it's licking at my slit, and the feeling is intense.

Art groans, and I realize my hand is wrapped around him, but I'm barely even moving because I'm so overwhelmed with what he's doing to me. I try to focus on jerking his cock, using his own precum to make it slick, and from his moaning I must be doing something right.

"Dean, you taste... Gods, you taste so good," he murmurs, his tentacle squeezing my dick again, undulating against it, another one sucking at my hole. A tentacle is wrapped around my back, gripping me tightly, and another reaches around to suck onto my nipple again, and I can't take it.

My orgasm rushes over me, catching me by surprise in its intensity and suddenness. I come all over Art's tentacle, my hand rhythmically squeezing him and jerking faster as the pleasure rides through my body.

That seems to do it for Art, because his cum spurts out onto my hand.

"Dean!" he cries out, and I lean in, pressing my lips against his. We kiss as our orgasms wane, our grips on each other easing. His tentacles stop pulsing against me, and he just holds me tightly.

When we're out of breath and spent, I let my head rest against his shoulder, wrapping my arms around the back of his neck. I'm still encased in his tentacles, and I realize I

really don't want to be anywhere else.

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Art

I'm not certain how long it's acceptable to keep one's tentacles wrapped around a sexual partner post orgasm. There's probably some social rule that specifies I'm only allowed five or ten minutes before I have to uncoil my many limbs and let Dean go.

But I'm not ready yet. I like sitting here on his couch, holding him close. Even though we're both a little sweaty, and I'm getting cold, I'm not quite ready for this to be over.

Orgasming with Dean was far better than I ever could have imagined.

"Did you know that most male cephalopods die during sex?" I ask, hoping a conversation might prolong our time together.

Dean's head jerks up. "What?"

"It's true. The female cephalopods kill them. They often eat them too."

He winces. "That's terrible."

"It's actually necessary. Cephalopods are cannibalistic. The females kill themselves after laying their eggs, possibly so they don't end up eating their young."

Dean bites his lip to hold back a smile.

"Did I say something wrong?" I ask. "Should I not talk about cephalopod mating

practices after sex? I thought it would be on-topic, seeing as how we just shared orgasms.”

He chuckles. “No, you didn’t say anything wrong at all.” He rests his forehead against mine. “As luck would have it, I’m neither female or a cephalopod, so I think you’re safe.”

“Obviously. I’m a shifter. Shifter cephalopods don’t kill each other after sex. That would be murder.”

He chuckles again. “Right. Of course.”

“We enjoy cuddling, though,” I admit.

He leans back to look me in the eye. “We could do a bit of that.”

I love the sensation of Dean wrapped in my tentacles. Not only because I can taste him and smell him, but because he’s warm and exactly the right size.

I feel so safe with him in this moment. It’s an experience I don’t often have with people outside my family. Of course, this is completely different than anything I’ve done with my family.

“Did you know there are some male cephalopods who try to mate with other males?” I ask.

“Homosexuality in the animal kingdom is not as rare as people think,” Dean says.

“True. But with this particular squid, it’s because they throw their sperm at any other squid that comes close, just to be safe.”

Dean laughs. I like the sound of it as much as I like the flavor of his skin. It's a little overwhelming how much I like him.

We sit there for a long time, Dean silent and coiled up in my tentacles. Often people try to fill the silence with senseless chatter when I'm with them, but Dean doesn't. He doesn't rush me out of his apartment either. By the time I glance over at the clock above his oven, it's been a full hour.

"I should go," I say, more to myself than to him.

"Okay."

I slowly unwind my tentacles. When he gets off my lap, my bare legs feel cold in his absence. I never thought sex would be an emotional thing. I figured people were overly dramatic about it, just like they're dramatic about everything else. But now I understand why people sometimes spend the night after sex.

"Do you want to use the bathroom? Feel free to get cleaned up if you want to," Dean tells me, pointing down the hall.

I stand up and grab my clothes off the floor before shuffling down the hall. It's horribly awkward. When I get in the bathroom, it takes far too long to scrub our cum off my body. I use the sink instead of the shower because that seems like it is more polite. When I finally put on my clothes and walk back into the living room, Dean is already clothed.

I wonder if I'll ever get to see him naked again or if this was a one-time thing.

"Thank you," I say.

"Thank you . I'll see you at work in the morning."

“Yeah.” I want to lean in to kiss him, but I don’t know if he’d want that, so I just walk toward the door and get my coat. Dean follows me and hovers next to the front door, clearly expecting me to leave.

What if I told him I didn’t want to?

I bundle up anyway and open the door. “Bye.”

Dean leans in and kisses my cheek. “Goodbye. Text me when you get home.”

It feels different than the other kisses we shared today. It isn’t sexual, but sweet. I smile as I walk out of his building and into the cold night. I walk for an entire block before I realize I’m going the wrong direction and hail a cab. I smile the whole way to my building. I even end up smiling at the clerk manning the front desk of the lobby. He turns around to see if I’m looking at anyone behind him because he’s so surprised.

I text Dean I’m home right there in the lobby. It’s nice that he cares.

Once I get to the elevator, I pause before selecting a floor. My family owns this entire building, and many of them live here. Most nights I visit my parents for a few minutes before turning in, but most nights I get home a lot earlier.

Instead, I select the ninth floor where my cousin Lisa lives. She’s only a year older than me, so we spent our childhoods running across the hall to play with each other. She always understood me better than any of the humans at school.

The elevator opens to a hallway with a door on each side. Lisa lives across the hall from her brother, Michael. He’s ten years older and usually traveling for work. I stand outside Lisa’s door and pull out my phone. When I open the chat window with Lisa, it’s mostly a series of the same two words, sent by both of us over and over

again.

I'm here.

I send them and wait. In less than thirty seconds, the doorknob twists and the door swings open. Lisa stands in the doorway wearing a fluffy pink robe, matching slippers, and a gooey plastic shell covering her whole face except her mouth and eyes.

“Do you want a face mask?” she asks.

“Yes, please.”

I follow her into her spacious apartment with floor to ceiling windows and the assortment of cozy furniture she insisted on buying for herself, rather than paying an interior decorator to do it for her. It's a wild array of colors and styles, totaling up to ten sofas and five armchairs, not including the table and chairs. I sit on the sofa by the window where she's set another book on chess strategies.

Lisa is one of the best players in the world.

She pulls out a foil package from a box on the coffee table and hands it to me. “Thirty minutes. Rinse your face first.”

I retreat to her bathroom where I take a proper shower. I know she won't mind because this is her guest bathroom. There's even a robe my size in the closet. After I'm done, I put on the mask and join her on her favorite pink couch. She's sprawled out, her tentacles the same light pink as the fabric.

“I had sex tonight,” I say.

She smiles. “That’s wonderful.”

“It was.”

I sprawl out next to her, letting my tentacles stretch up and over the back of the chair. She picks up her book and begins reading again, so I close my eyes and allow myself to fully relax. With Lisa, talking is rarely necessary. We can just be.

It’s strange that I was able to just be with Dean too.

I might like him too much after only sharing orgasms once. I’m not sure what I’m going to do about that.

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Dean

Despite one of the best orgasms ever, I ended up tossing and turning all night. I'm not sure how I could miss Art so soon, but I wanted his tentacles surrounding me, holding me close. I'd barely held back the request for Art to stay the night, but I didn't want him to feel obligated or to overwhelm him.

I was his first sexual experience. I couldn't stop thinking about it. The minute my alarm went off and I groggily hit my phone, it was my first thought.

I had sex with Art. I was the first person to ever have sex with Art. And when could we do it again? Would Art want to do it again?

As I got dressed and drank some coffee, it hit me that today might be awkward. Should I be flirtatious? Would Art welcome that, or would I make him uncomfortable? Was this just a one time thing for him, or was he interested in more?

We really should have talked more last night, but I had just been so comfortable, and Art had seemed settled too.

By the time I'm draining my coffee, I realize that if I feel awkward, Art probably has no clue how he's supposed to act at work today. He might totally ignore me and think that's normal after sex.

I chuckle to myself, thinking that totally ignoring your sexual partner is probably better than killing them, so I guess as long as Art doesn't try to murder me in the lab today it's a plus and possibly a sign that he likes me.

I grab a muffin and head to work, thinking about Art the entire way, playing different conversation starters in my head. I run into James heading into the building, as usual, but I only half listen to him go on about the latest reality show.

“Dean, man, you ok?” James asks in the elevator.

“Uh, yeah. Sorry. Distracted this morning,” I admit.

“Does it have anything to do with the rumor going around about an extra work assignment? I heard people at lunch talking about it and saying they were going to report the whole thing to HR. They were saying it’s totally unfair and speciesist,” James says.

I give him my full attention then, grabbing his arm. “Wait, what? What are you talking about?”

James looks at me, surprised. “I thought it had to be false, but I knew you couldn’t make lunch a few days in the past week. People are saying you’re being forced to hang out with some antisocial asshole coworker. I didn’t give it too much credence, because you didn’t say anything. Plus, I don’t remember you disliking anyone you work with, so I couldn’t think of who the antisocial asshole would be.”

James just shrugs at the last part, but I’m fuming, and James must realize it from my face.

“It’s true? You know they can’t do that. You should totally go to HR and they’ll sort it out. It is speciesist for someone in your lab to make the human work overtime without pay just to help out a cryptid,” James insists, and I can tell he’s getting fired up on my behalf.

James is a good guy, and I know he has my back. I also can’t believe there’s a rumor

like that going around.

“No, that isn’t it at all,” I insist.

“You aren’t being forced to hang out with some cryptid?” James asks.

“Well, sort of...” I start, realizing that yeah, Frank’s request actually was really unprofessional. “But I don’t mind,” I say, adding, “and Art is not some asshole coworker. And this wasn’t his idea.”

“Whoa, it’s Art? I’ve only ever heard you say nice things about him,” James says. “I don’t know how this got around, but it sounded like some guy was totally taking advantage of you. Everyone was pretty outraged about it.”

“Shit,” I murmur. This is the last thing Art and I need.

The elevator stops at James’s floor, and I get off with him, pulling him into the nearby restroom.

“Listen, if anyone says anything, set them straight. This was not Art’s idea. Art and I were both totally blindsided by this, and in fact Frank was really nasty to Art about the whole thing. If anything, he’d probably have a solid case to take to HR. He was basically told if he didn’t hang out with me and get some social skills that he’d get fired, which is kind of bullshit. And I probably should have done something, but... Well, I like hanging out with Art.” I can’t help the blush that invades my face at that admission.

James smacks me in the arm, grinning. “Aw, Dean, I need some details!”

I end up blushing even more, which just makes him cackle in glee.

I grab his arm again. “I’m serious, James.”

“Alright, alright,” he says, laughter dying down. “Look, I’ll set it straight with anyone I talk to, but who knows if someone already complained to HR.”

“Shit,” I groan. “I do not need this complication.”

“Try not to worry, man. I’m sure it’ll be ok. You’ll get it sorted out,” James assures me.

I nod and breathe out, trying to calm down. Now is not the time to get fired up over this. Both James and I have to get working before we’re late.

We say our goodbyes, and I head out of the bathroom and up to my floor, trying to think clearly. How did a rumor like that even get started? Unfortunately, the list of people who might bad mouth Art is probably not the shortest. He’s cute and crazy intelligent, and I’m sure there’s quite a bit of jealousy over both of those things. I think he’s one of the higher paid and more important scientists in the building. Add in his general awkwardness, and I can bet that he’s offended someone without meaning to.

The main problem, however, is that it makes hanging out a little trickier. I don’t want people talking badly about Art behind his back, and I sure as hell don’t want him getting in trouble with HR, but I really do want to hang out more with him. I want to introduce him to all the cheesy human holiday traditions. I had such a good time ice skating and watching a movie with him. I want to go Christmas shopping, make Christmas cookies, and decorate a tree with him. I get a mental image of Art with a Santa hat on and an ornament hanging from every tentacle, and I can barely stifle my laughter.

And when it comes time for the holiday party, I want to go with him. Never mind that

it's totally odd that a cryptid company has a holiday party, and that I've never seen Art attend once. I want to be his first time for a lot of things, and I smile at that thought as I swipe my way into the lab. Then I hear the crash.

I look over to see a beaker broken on the floor right beside Art's clothes floating in mid-air. Art appears to be nowhere in sight, and I'm amazed again at how good his camouflage is.

"Morning, Art!" I say, trying to set a cheery tone.

He doesn't answer, and I walk over and start picking up the pieces of broken beaker, asking, "Do you want me to work on sample Z25 today, or did you have something else in mind?" Maybe talking about work will make him less nervous.

Art goes back to his normal color, and his tentacle reaches down to stop my hand from grabbing another piece of beaker. I look up, but he avoids my gaze and gives his tentacle a disgruntled look. It very reluctantly unpeels from my arm.

Ok, so maybe talking about work will not solve the problem, since now he kind of looks like I contaminated his most promising lab specimen. I have to remind myself that I cannot kiss him in the lab. Not a good idea. So I smile instead, and I touch his face gently so that he looks at me.

"Hey, I had a really good time last night, and I hope we can go out again soon," I say.

Art breathes out a sigh. "I had a very enjoyable time as well, Dean Miller. I would like to go out with you again, although I do not think I would like to be on frozen water."

I chuckle at that. "Yeah, no more ice skating," I agree. I hesitate, then I figure I may as well just go for it. Art is nothing if not direct, after all. "Art, would you like to date

me?”

“Date you?” he asks.

I’m not sure if he’s confused by the term or the idea of dating me. “Yeah. We would continue to go out, but rather than going out as coworkers or friends, we’d be boyfriends. We would talk on the phone and go out regularly outside of work.”

“Like mates?” Art asks, looking slightly excited.

“I mean, maybe? Dating is like trying out a mate, I guess. That’s what humans do. We try out mates to see if it will work long term, and if it doesn’t, that’s ok,” I add. “I like you. I’d like to date you and be your boyfriend, if you’d like that too. I want to hang out with you because I want to, not because Frank told me we have to. And it’s totally ok if you don’t feel the same way, but I figured we should talk about it.”

Art is staring at me, and I’m not sure what’s going through his head. Finally, he answers, “Yes, I would like to be your trial mate, Dean Miller. What must I do in this trial mating scenario? Is there a manual?”

“No, no manual. We kind of talk about it and decide for ourselves how we want things to go. Maybe we could do that over dinner tonight?” I ask. We really should get to work, and at some point I should probably tell him about the rumor and HR, but I don’t think now is a good time. I probably gave him enough to think about.

“Yes, dinner would be an appropriate place to have that conversation, and I would enjoy having another meal with you, Dean Miller,” Art answers.

“Good,” I say, smiling. I reach down to grab the broken beaker pieces again, but Art’s tentacles stop me. Fuck, he’s hot, and working with him might be harder than I imagined.

“You might cut yourself. I will pick these up. You are correct that sample Z25 probably needs attention first,” Art comments.

“Ok,” I say, and it’s my turn to blush, because his tentacles definitely make me think dirty thoughts.

For the first time in our entire work relationship in the lab, it’s me who is scurrying off to get some space from Art. Only it’s not because I’m shy. It’s totally because if I don’t, I will definitely kiss him. Or more than that. Working with his sexy tentacles after I know what they can do to me might be a new level of torture.

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Art

I have watched an adequate number of rom coms to know that dining at one's place of residence is an effective mating ritual. That is the primary reason I invite Dean Miller over to my apartment for dinner. The secondary reason is a suspicion that if I don't, he'll invite me to eat at a restaurant with him. I've had quite enough of interacting with humans I don't know, thank you very much.

Lisa texts me while I'm setting the table and asks me if I want to go to the bookstore with her. I message her back.

No. I am eating dinner with Dean Miller tonight. Then we will probably have sex.

She sends me a smiley emoji. That sounds pleasant.

I set down a second fork next to Dean Miller's plate and send her a thumbs up. I'm not allowed to use a thumbs up emoji with people at work because Frank says it's passive aggressive, but Lisa doesn't mind.

Another message pops up at the bottom of the screen. I would like to come over and meet Dean Miller.

I send a second thumbs up. But you must leave after five minutes. Otherwise it may impact the likelihood of sexual intercourse later in the evening.

I don't know how long this trial mate situation with Dean Miller will last, and I don't want to waste a moment with him. Every time he brushed my hand or got close to me

in the lab today, my heart raced like I'd just sprinted up a hill. But my metachrosis didn't kick in after the first time. Dean Miller excites me and steadies me at the same time.

I've never met anyone who could do that before.

My phone buzzes. It's a text from Lisa.

Five minutes should be adequate.

I am not surprised when Lisa walks through my kitchen just as I finish setting the table. As long as she texts me ahead of time, I don't mind her using the spare key I gave her to watch over my plants on the rare occasions when I have to travel for work. My apartment has the exact same floor plan as Lisa's, but our spaces couldn't be more different. All my windows are lined with potted plants. Some are on the floor, while others are hanging from the ceiling or carefully arranged on the shelving I had installed in front of the window with the best light exposure.

Among the many potted plants on my coffee tables in the living room, I have bookcases and reading nooks. It's a labyrinth of sorts, with far more furniture than the interior decorator recommended. But I like getting lost in it. I feel safe here with my books and my plants.

"Why do you like this human?" Lisa asks.

"He is visually pleasing," I say. But it isn't just that. At least not anymore. "He is also kind and of above average intelligence, for a human."

She nods. "That is a nice combination of attributes."

"It is."

I don't tell her I enjoy the way Dean Miller tastes. That's a detail I want to keep all to myself. It's a secret that makes me smile every time I think about it.

There's a knock at the door. It's a little surreal to walk toward my front door and open it to find Dean Miller on my doorstep. He's always seemed like this beautiful, distant man who could never be interested in someone as awkward as I am. And yet, here he is. He smiles at me, and my stomach flip flops.

"Good evening," he says.

"Good evening. You have a very nice smile. I enjoy looking at it."

His smile widens and his eyes almost sparkle. That isn't something human eyes should be able to do, but Dean Miller's eyes definitely are.

"I'm Lisa, his cousin," she says. I didn't notice her approaching the front door. She stands next to me, quietly assessing Dean Miller. She stares at him for longer than is socially appropriate. This is what she does to her opponents prior to a chess match. No wonder they're all terrified of her.

Dean Miller turns his twinkly smile in her direction and holds out his right hand. His left hand is holding a big paper bag, probably with our dinner in it. "Hi. I'm Dean, Art's boyfriend."

She raises her eyebrows in question.

"Temporary mate? Romantic partner?" Dean Miller guesses.

"You are aesthetically pleasing. I can understand why Art had sex with you," she says.

He bites back his smile. “Thank you. Um, can I come in?”

I open the door wider and step back so he can enter. Lisa doesn’t move, and Dean Miller has to slide by, narrowly avoiding brushing against her.

“Your bag smells delicious,” Lisa says.

Dean Miller carries it to the counter and sets it on the edge. “I brought Chinese food from my favorite place. They have great seafood. You’re welcome to have some.”

Lisa shakes her head. “I’m only allowed to stay for five minutes so I don’t interfere with your mating ritual.”

Dean Miller lets out a cough that sounds suspiciously like a laugh. “Oh. Um, thank you. That’s very considerate of you.”

“No, it’s not. Art insisted.”

Dean Miller doesn’t answer her. He’s staring at my bookshelves. “Sorry. This is your apartment, Art?”

“Yes. I wouldn’t invite you to someone else’s apartment.”

He laughs. “Right. Could I...” He gestures to the walkway between my bookcases.

I nod. The idea of Dean walking through my favorite space in the world feels similar to the way my heart races when he touches me. He reaches out his hand as he walks between the bookcases, running his fingers along the spines of the books. His eyes widen in wonder when he gets to the windows lined with plants.

“Wow. It’s like a forest in here. This is beautiful.” He turns to me as he says it, and

for a moment, I forget whether he's talking about me or my apartment.

Dean Miller is confusing sometimes. He makes every inch of my body come alive in ways I've never experienced before.

"Art decorated it himself," Lisa says. She once again appears at my side. "He's a special person. You should recognize his value and treat him accordingly."

Dean Miller shoves his hands in his pockets. "You're right."

"You are being too aggressive," I tell her. "Please stop antagonizing my temporary mate."

She glances at her watch. "Fine. It's been five minutes. I will leave the two of you to your mating ritual. But he should be warned that our family has extensive financial resources and a fondness for helping Karma along, should he choose to be unkind to you." With that, she spins around, her black skirt swishing as she walks away.

"I'm sorry. The only time she interacts with people outside our family is when she's destroying them in chess, so she can be intense," I try to explain.

Dean Miller shrugs. "I like her. I'm also a little scared of her, but I get the impression that she wants me to be."

"Yes. That's accurate."

Dean sits down on my favorite armchair. It's the one facing the center window. He holds his arms out to me. I sit gingerly on his lap, worried that my weight will cut off the circulation in his legs. He wraps his arms around me and holds me close to his warm body. My tentacles go rogue in the most embarrassing way possible. One of them wraps around the back of his head, and two others slide under the hem of his

shirt and splay against the softness of his abdomen. I open my mouth to apologize, but Dean Miller's eyes close and he lets out a contented sigh. "God, that feels good."

So I allow myself to enjoy the salty flavor of his skin and his musky scent. I feel so safe and cozy here in my favorite place with Dean. He belongs here as much as my favorite armchair.

"Could we eat dinner here?" he asks.

"Yes. But we'll have to lay out a blanket on the floor so we don't ruin the furniture."

He opens his eyes. "Like an indoor picnic? That sounds perfect."

The food is cooling on the counter. I should get up and get it for us. But I like sitting in Dean's lap a little too much.

"Maybe in five minutes?" I suggest. "I'd like to taste you instead of food for right now."

He holds me a little closer. "Deal."

Art

Dean Miller asks about my different plants as we eat. We talk about my undergraduate degree in botany and also about his grandmother, who had a greenhouse in her backyard when he was a child. It's easy to talk to him—so easy I decide that I don't want to take him back to my bedroom.

I never sleep in there. It would feel strange to have sex with him on the mattress I've only used a handful of times.

After we clean up the dishes and the blanket, I take his hand, wordlessly guiding him down the hall. Initially, we step into the bedroom, but I don't stop there. I lead him further to the adjoined bathroom.

Just like the living room, the windows here extend from the floor to the ceiling. They're lined with huge water tanks where my aquatic plants live. The bathroom itself is dominated by the enormous tub in the corner.

Dean Miller's eyes widen with wonder. "Wow. This is incredible, Art."

"Thank you. One of the tanks has freshwater plants and the other is saltwater."

He walks along the edge of the room, running his fingers along the glass like he ran them along the spines of my books. "I've never seen anything like it. And your tub is huge!"

"That's my bed," I tell him, hoping he won't find it too strange. "This apartment

dates back to when cephalopods were still in hiding. That's why there's a human bedroom attached. We often sleep in water, so we don't need a traditional human bedroom with a bed."

He looks back at me with that same expression of wonder. "Really? I had no idea. Then I'm glad I didn't ask you to spend the night with me. I sort of wanted to, you know. But I only have a shower stall."

I can't help but smile. Dean Miller wanted me to spend the night with him. "I would not mind sleeping in a human bed with you, Dean Miller."

Dean smiles, walking closer to me.

"Do you like taking baths?" I ask. That's what humans call it when they get into their tubs. They only use water to clean themselves, which has always seemed strange to me. Some of them have pools, but even then, they use the water primarily as exercise equipment. The only exception seems to be hot tubs, which are woefully unsanitary when they're publicly accessible.

"Are you offering to take a bath with me?" he asks.

"No. I would like to have sexual intercourse with you under water. But I figured a bath could serve as a mating ritual."

He smiles at me. "I'd like that."

I walk around to the side of the tub and turn on the water. The spout is larger than the ones in human tubs because the tub is much bigger. "This building has its own water filtration system. We recycle our bath water every twenty-four hours. Most water filtration systems were developed by aquatic cryptids, actually. Necessity is the mother of invention."

“I read a study about that in my Intro to Cryptids class in college. They had a whole section on how the unique needs of cryptids have advanced human technology. Did you know that the Wright brothers were harpies? One of them broke a wing, and they developed the first airplane so he could fly with his kids.” Dean Miller tugs at the neck of his sweater and pulls it over his head. Last night, the light in his apartment was dim. I can’t help but stare at how beautiful his body is in the bright light of my bathroom. His chest is lightly sprinkled with hair and his arms are wired with muscle. Not too much muscle, like a bodybuilder, but the lean muscle of a man who spends a lot of his time studying. Along his back and arms are light pink rings of tender skin. Those are from my tentacles.

A wild thrill shoots through me.

He reaches for his belt next, unfastening it and the button of his jeans without hesitation. When I first met Dean, I wasn’t sure if I was envious of his confidence or attracted to it. I guess it was a bit of both. He pulls down his pants and underwear until he’s standing in my bathroom completely nude. His cock is already half-hard.

He glances at me with a mischievous smile. “Now I get to see you naked too, right?”

I didn’t exactly think that part through. Last night, taking my clothes off made me nervous, but I was in the heat of the moment, so I didn’t have time to dwell on my insecurities. Now I worry that the bright light accentuating all of Dean’s raw beauty will be unforgiving to my much less attractive body.

“Um, yes. That’s only fair,” I say. My voice trembles a bit.

Dean Miller’s eyes soften and his smile fades. “If you don’t want to take your clothes off, you don’t have to.”

“It’s fine,” I insist. “We’re getting in the water.”

He considers me for a moment. “You could use your metachrosis, if you want. I don’t mind. I want you to be comfortable.”

Just like that, I feel safe again. I don’t know how he does it. I’m always anxious around other humans. I have been for as long as I can remember.

He walks up the steps into the tub, showing off the curve of his ass. One of my tentacles stretches out, about to touch it, but I manage to reel it back in.

It is a good ass, though. A part of me wishes I didn’t show so much restraint.

I willfully make my body fade into the background. The process feels a little like holding my breath or trying not to blink. I strip out of my clothes in a rush, as if being naked all of the sudden will somehow be less embarrassing than letting Dean Miller watch me undress. He sits down in the corner of the tub, tactfully not looking in my direction. I approach the tub slowly. Staying invisible is always harder when I’m moving. I’m sure he could see some kind of movement if he was watching for me. When I step into the tub and sit down, the splash and displacement of the water is even more obvious.

Why is this so much harder than last night? I don’t think it’s just insecurity about my body. It’s something much deeper than that. I guess last night was only sex. But now that Dean Miller and I are temporary mates, it’s more complicated.

“I really like you, Art, and I have for a long time,” he says, still not looking in my direction.

“You have?”

“Yeah. That’s part of the reason I agreed so quickly to Frank’s bullshit plan. I wanted the excuse to spend more time with you.”

I had no idea. For a moment, I lose control of my metachrosis, and I'm suddenly visible. He looks over and smiles at me. "Hey, there."

Where Dean Miller's body is wired with muscle and hairy, mine is decidedly not. I am scrawny with knobby knees and very little body hair to speak of. I hug my arms and look away from him. Unfortunately, my tentacles are not at all concerned about my body insecurities, and they slither toward Dean. Not just one or two of them, but four, and they wind themselves around him, pulling him closer.

"I'm sorry," I say.

He leans in until I can feel the heat of his breath on my lips. "Don't be."

This is what I want. Judging by the thickening of Dean Miller's cock, it's what he wants too. I should stop worrying about things I cannot change. I close the distance between us, pressing my lips to his. It's wonderful to taste his mouth at the same time my tentacles taste his body. His flavor and scent are a heady combination. One of my tentacles slithers down his right ass cheek. I almost break away from him, worried that I've taken things too far, but he moans into my mouth.

Another tentacle reaches for his left ass cheek. This time, I allow myself to enjoy the sensation of squeezing his supple flesh. He moans again, not at all freaked out or surprised. Does he know what I want to do to him? If I told him, would he be into it, or would he think I was a freaky stereotype straight out of a tentacle porno?

To my utter horror, the tentacle exploring his right ass cheek slides to the center and slips between his cheeks. I finally jerk away, not sure what his reaction will be. He stares back at me with heavy-lidded eyes.

"Do you have lube?" he asks.

“For what?”

He gives me a gentle kiss on the tip of my nose. “For whatever you’re doing back there.”

“Um, yes. I have lube.”

He kisses me again, this time on the lips. We just make out for a few minutes. Our kisses are nice and slow. The first time he kissed me, I was so preoccupied with doing it right that it was harder to get lost in it. This time, it feels too good to worry about anything. Our tongues meet, and I love the drag of his against mine. It’s almost as good as squeezing his ass. I want to do that again. Hell, I want to do it every day.

I reach around with my hand and place it on his ass. I feel him smile against my lips.

“Mmm, I like that,” he whispers.

I grab his flesh and squeeze. It’s so much better with my hand. Dean kisses me harder, sliding his fingers through my hair to pull me closer by the back of my head. I reach for him with my other hand, until I’m cupping both his ass cheeks.

He breaks away from the kiss to climb onto my lap. Technically, this was the position we were in last night, but our jeans were still partially on, and we weren’t in the water. This is much better. I squeeze both of his ass cheeks at the same time.

“Mmmm.”

“Do you like... that sort of thing?” I ask.

He lets out a breathy chuckle. “If that’s your way of asking if I like bottoming, the answer is yes.”

My cheeks grow hot. That is exactly what I was asking. I've apparently been reduced to vague euphemisms.

He tilts his head. "Is that what you want?"

"To bottom? Absolutely not. I know I don't have 'top energy.' But I... I mean, if you aren't interested?—"

Dean kisses me. "I am definitely interested."

Relief rushes through me. I kiss him back with fervor, finally allowing myself to properly hope for the things I've wanted to do with Dean for a long time. His body rocks closer, and the heat of his slippery cock slides against me. This time, I'm the one who moans. We rut against each other. I hold his ass in my hands possessively, allowing my fingers to creep between his ass cheeks. He lets out a breathy "fuck."

"Could I do it with my tentacles?" I ask, even though I know that's vague too.

"You mean me?" Dean asks. "You want to fuck me with your tentacles?" He's grinding against me desperately now.

"Yes."

"Good," he says. "Because I've fantasized about that."

He's fantasized about my tentacles? That's a lot to take in. I mean, I knew that some humans were into that sort of thing, but I never thought Dean Miller would be.

Of course, my tentacles have an immediate reaction. One of them slides back down between his ass cheeks, and another releases some of that lubricant he wanted.

“Do you, um, prefer store bought lubricant, or...” I mumble, not sure how to tell him that I make my own.

“As opposed to what?” he asks. Then he stops because my tentacle has dragged the gooey substance between his ass cheeks.

“It’s just that sex underwater requires a certain kind of lubricant, and mine is perfect for it. But we could buy some?—”

“Yours, as in...” Dean Miller trails off, waiting for an explanation.

“It’s common for organisms that sexually reproduce to self lubricate.”

His eyes widen.

“Like I said, if you want to buy some lubricant?—”

He brings me in for a kiss that takes my breath away. “I want you. Right now.”

I close my eyes as Dean Miller continues to kiss me, his mouth traveling across my jaw and my neck. His mouth is greedy and certain. There’s absolutely no hesitation, not even when one of my tentacles gently slides against his hole. If anything, his mouth becomes more insistent.

It’s rare that I have complete control over my tentacles. It usually only happens when I’m in the zone at work. The synchronicity of my mind and body moving as one is my favorite thing about getting lost in my job.

There are times when that synchronicity happens outside of work, of course. They’re rare, and they usually involve me giving into some kind of temptation. My tentacles love temptation.

This time, as my tentacle drags against the tender skin of Dean Miller's hole, I'm in control. I tease the puckered skin, tasting it and memorizing the texture. Every part of me is focused on how soft he is—how tight. He shifts his hips back ever so slightly, and his rim gives under the pressure of my tip. I probe inside him, overwhelmed by the glorious heat and pressure.

“Your anus is very pleasing to me,” I say.

He presses a kiss to the crook of my neck, and I can feel the smile on his lips.

I don't tell him that I can taste his insides. That sounds like something a cannibal would say. But I love how intimate his flavor is. It's like tasting the core of his being. I savor him for a while, staying completely still. He does the same, as if he's savoring me too.

“I've always liked deep penetration,” Dean whispers. “Really deep.”

I push deeper inside him. He lets out a pent-up breath. I twist my tentacle, testing the elasticity of his body, wondering just how deep he can take me. I don't want to hurt him.

“More, Art,” he groans.

I give him what he wants, sliding in so far, he lets out a gasp that's either bad or very, very good.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

“Fuck, yes. Your tentacle is so thick at the base.”

“That isn't the base.”

He burrows his nose into my neck. “Then I want more.”

“I could hurt you.”

He shakes his head. “Go slow, and it will be fine.”

I ease in further, releasing more lubricant as I burrow my tentacle deep inside Dean. His breath is shaking, his hands clinging to my shoulders with a death grip. The intensity of it all is beautiful. I’ve never shared anything like this with another person.

“Deeper,” he begs.

“Hold on.” I withdraw from him, spreading the lubricant as I go. When I push in again, the way is smoother. I coil my tentacles near the tip, so I can push more of myself inside him. The way his body swallows me is the stuff of my fantasies. This is better than I ever imagined. I didn’t think a man could take this much of me. I keep pushing, even when Dean lets out a guttural groan, even when his walls are so tight that the pressure is almost painful.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck. Stop,” he says, his body tensing up.

I begin to withdraw.

“No. Don’t.” He takes in a ragged breath. “Just stay for a minute.”

I wrap my arms around him—my tentacles too. I can’t get close enough to him. I want to claim him in every way. We stay like that for longer than a minute—long enough that the stillness isn’t enough any more. White-hot need pulses through me.

“Do you think you could... fuck me?” Dean asks. “Like this?”

I pull out and push back in, reaching as deep as I was before, but much faster. His soft moan is the sweetest sound I've ever heard. I do it again and again, the force of my thrusts almost violent. I worry that I'm being too rough with him, but he lets out a strangled, "Yes."

I allow myself to fuck him with an abandon I've only fantasized about. I don't even try to be careful. I pound into him mercilessly, savoring each of his grunts and the way his fingernails dig into my back. My other tentacles sucker the planes of his chest and abdomen. I circle one of them around his cock and stroke. He takes it—he takes me, throwing his head back, his grunts morphing into a shout. Just as his whole body tenses, I withdraw and push in two tentacles. Not nearly as deep, but deep enough that the width of them sends him over the edge. He scrabbles his nails over my skin, his fingers trembling, and it's everything I've ever wanted. I only have to touch my cock, and I'm coming with him, my vision going white from the pleasure.

After a moment passes, Dean lets out a breathy laugh. "Oh my fucking God. That was... wow."

I can't help but smile. I'm the one who made Dean Miller fall apart. With my most secretive fantasies, no less. He wanted it all.

I hold him close and bury my nose in the crook of his shoulder. "Thank you, Dean Miller."

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:15 pm

Dean

I wake up cuddled in tentacles. I can feel where Art has suctioned onto my skin in places, and it's both arousing and cozy at the same time.

Last night was... Is there a word for better than amazing? It was the best sex I've ever had, and that wasn't only because of Art's tentacles.

Although, my god, Art's tentacles. I shiver just thinking about them, and his tentacles and arms both squeeze me a little tighter.

I'm thinking about initiating round two when I hear a grumble, and I'm not even sure whose stomach it is. I open my eyes to see Art looking at me.

"We must feed you, Dean Miller," he states, and if I'm not mistaken, his eyes have a vague tinge of panic to them. Which makes me think of what he told me about cephalopod mating.

I can't help the laugh that escapes me. "I'm not going to eat you , Art. I mean, I might eat you in a sexy way, but definitely not in the unsexy way."

Art looks confused after that statement, and I resist the urge to laugh again. I don't want Art to think I'm laughing at him—his brain is a fascinating place, and I love how he thinks.

Finally he says, "I am unsure how eating someone could be considered sexy. Perhaps it can be for the person doing the eating, but I would think losing body parts would

always be an unpleasurable experience, even if it didn't result in death."

At that I do laugh again, and I lean forward and kiss him on the nose. "Eating someone in a sexy way is a euphemism for oral sex, Art."

"Ah," he replies, relaxing. "I have never tried that. My tentacles have tasted you, but my mouth has not. I would like to both give and receive that type of experience."

My dick jumps a little at his comment, but then my stomach rumbles again, and Art peels his tentacles off of me. The gentle suction across so many points on my skin makes my whole body tingle in delight, but then Art is rolling out of bed and pulling pants on.

"We must feed you, Dean Miller," he states.

"Yeah, I guess so," I answer. There's always time later for sex, and I definitely know something that we'll be trying out.

I realize that it's Saturday—somehow this week has flown by, and I'm thrilled at the idea that Art and I can have the full day (and if I'm really lucky, maybe even the full weekend) to hang out.

I roll out of bed naked, contemplating putting on last night's clothes. I wish I'd brought something else to wear. Art seems to notice my predicament, because he holds up a pair of sweatpants. I smile and nod, taking them as he pulls on a pair too. He slides a shirt on as well—I've realized that Art is self-conscious, even though he has no reason to be. I notice that he doesn't offer me a shirt, and I'm flattered as I turn to see him staring at my chest.

I walk over and give him a soft kiss on the mouth. "What do cephalopods eat for breakfast?" I ask him, wrapping my arms around him.

“I prefer seafood, even for breakfast,” Art states. “I have partaken in many more human foods, however, and although I don’t have much here to make, I would be happy to go out to breakfast with you.”

I think of just the place, and it actually isn’t that far from Art’s. We disentangle from each other, and I head over to grab my phone. I scroll through and find the deli I’m thinking of, and when I open the website to check their hours, I see that there’s an ad for a holiday bazaar today as well.

“Ohh... The place I’m thinking of is right near a street fair that’s open today. It’s fun—they’ve got vendors and food stands and decorated trees and all sorts of holiday stuff. I usually pop in every year, and I love visiting the stands and buying gifts for people. Do you want to head over there and interact with people a bit more?” I ask. I notice Art’s hesitation. “If you’re busy today that’s ok...” I add. I don’t want to force myself on him, even though I’d love to hang out.

“No, I am not busy...” he states, but he still looks hesitant.

“Would you rather not do the holiday fair? I’d love to do something with you, Art, no matter what it is,” I say.

He breathes out a sigh, and a tentacle slithers toward me before he actually gives it a tiny glare. He looks up at me then, explaining, “I am usually not very good at public events. I am... awkward.”

I smile at him, walking back over to give him a hug (and to let his tentacles wrap me back up—I will never get tired of that feeling). “Art, I’ll be with you. I’ll help you get through any awkward moments. But if you have no interest in going, that’s fine too, and we can pick something else. I don’t want you to feel uncomfortable.”

“Will there be skating on frozen water again?” he asks suspiciously.

“No, Art, no frozen water. And if there is, we won’t skate on it, I promise,” I answer.

“Then I would like to go. I am always interested in the customs of other cultures, but I often feel out of place. If you will not be embarrassed by my presence, I think it could be an educational experience.” He looks me up and down and adds, “Though I suppose you will need to get dressed.”

His sad look at that idea makes me smile. “Yeah, but we can swing by my place for me to grab some clothes. I’m not far from here,” I say, looking for my shirt and shoes. I can’t wait to spend the day with Art and introduce him to all things Christmas.

We stop off at my place for me to get changed, and then we stop by the deli I’d been thinking of, and Art is quite pleased with the bagel and lox I tell him to try. I’m kind of surprised he hasn’t had it before, and I’m glad to introduce him to something new that he clearly enjoys.

We eat at a leisurely pace, chatting the whole time about work, books, and movies. It turns out that Art has seen a few movies, despite not being a fan of television in general, and he especially loves critiquing anything set near or in the ocean. His commentary is hysterical, and it makes me want to watch them all with him to get the firsthand critiques. A movie date is definitely in our future—although maybe not at a movie theater, because I can tell Art will not be able to hold back the comments when things are inaccurate. That’s ok by me—I’ve never minded someone who talked during a movie.

By the time we finish eating and head over to the holiday bazaar, it’s actually afternoon, and the festival is crowded but not so packed you can’t walk. I grab Art’s hand, leading him around to point out different stands. It’s a very cryptid-friendly neighborhood, so luckily no one gives his tentacles a second glance, although I notice he tries to keep them held against himself or they hold onto me (which I definitely

don't complain about).

He's fascinated by the glass ornament stand, marveling at how the artist was able to capture such an oceanic feel to some of them. They really are beautiful, and I notice him gazing at one that he says reminds him of a jellyfish. I grab the guy's card when Art isn't looking, making a mental note to get him one for a gift. Art may not celebrate Christmas, but I still want to get him a gift. I'll have to let him know, though, so he doesn't feel awkward that he didn't get me one.

We make it around most of the stands, and Art and I buy a pair of matching hats and mittens that are too cute to pass up. I use the excuse that it's getting chilly, but really I just think Art looks adorable in a hat with a pompom.

The sun is setting when we get to the tree decorating competition area. It's a walkway with about twenty trees lining it, and they're all lit up and already twinkling in the twilight. I grab Art's hand as we walk towards them.

"This is one of my favorite things about this holiday bazaar. A bunch of different organizations and charities decorate the trees for the holiday season," I explain to Art. "I love how unique and creative the organizations get. Like that one! All the ornaments are made out of old book pages. Even the garland is made of book pages!" I marvel, stopping to stare.

"The librarian's association," Art reads off the stand in front of the tree. "I do not understand why librarians would use books in order to decorate a tree, Dean Miller. Are they not supposed to care for books? Yet these have obviously been torn apart."

"I never thought about it quite like that," I laugh. "Honestly, these were probably damaged books that were set to be destroyed. So they probably repurposed them."

"I do not understand why humans decorate trees for Christmas," Art states as we

move on to the next tree. It's from a local elementary school, and my heart melts a little seeing all the handmade ornaments. "These ornaments are not even visually pleasing. They look like a child's craft project."

"They probably are. I used to make ornaments like that when I was a kid," I say. "They're pretty cheesy, but my mom and dad always hung them up in a place of honor on the tree. I think they still have them all packed away in a box somewhere. I can usually find at least a few on the tree at my parents' house each year," I chuckle.

Art is staring at me, and I can't quite place the look on his face. "This makes you very happy, Dean Miller."

"Well, yeah," I answer. "I guess we decorate trees because winter can be pretty bleak, and a little light and color amidst all that dreariness is pretty special. I think the ornaments become things that we pass down and are their own sort of tradition. Of course, there's probably some historical reason for it, but as a kid, I just loved the festive fun. We'd put on Christmas carols, make popcorn and gingerbread cookies, and all hang out together as a family."

"That sounds... pleasant," Art states.

We keep walking, and I drag him over to one of my favorite trees. "The local LGBTQ+ center does this tree. Isn't it fantastic?" I ask. Everything is rainbow on the tree or has the colors of one of the LGBTQ+ flags on it. There are animals, little figures, and even tiny knit ornaments in all the colors of the rainbow.

"Did you know that most species exhibit same sex pair bonding? Humans are one of the few species to exhibit homophobia," Art states.

"Yeah, but we're making progress," I state. Maybe I'm ever the optimist, or maybe cryptids really have been good for humanity.

We meander through the rest of the trees, and I can tell Art appreciates the thought that goes into all the decorating. When we're almost at the end of the walkway, I tell him, "I usually decorate the tree for the holiday party. Maybe this year you'll come with me and you'll get to see it."

"You'd like me to go to the holiday party with you?" Art asks, and he sounds surprised.

"Of course I would. I like you, Art. A lot. I want to do all sorts of things with you," I say, and Art blushes, which of course sends my mind in a totally dirty direction.

I lean forward and kiss him then, right in the middle of the twinkling lights, and I feel like we're in our own holiday movie.

"I think I might begin to enjoy the holiday season, Dean Miller," Art says, blushing and breathing heavily.

I lean my forehead against his. "I'll help you have a Merry Christmas, Art. You've already made my holiday season a million times better."

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:15 pm

Dean

The weekend flew by in a rush, and somehow it's another Monday. We went back to Art's Saturday night and had another round of mind blowing sex (although blow jobs are still on the to do list). I ended up staying over again Saturday night, but Sunday morning we headed our separate ways.

Lisa stopped by Sunday and asked when I would be departing. I was used to Art, so I knew she wasn't trying to be rude, but I also realized I needed to grocery shop, do laundry, and get myself situated for work on Monday. Plus, I didn't want Art getting sick of me.

Still, I missed his tentacles wrapped around me when I fell asleep on Sunday night. I'm growing really attached to those suckers—every pun intended.

I also told Art about the rumor. He didn't seem concerned, which I suppose is good. But Frank seems to have it out for Art, so I think it might be best if we beat any office gossip and tell the company we're dating.

Which is how I find myself fidgeting outside the HR office first thing on Monday morning, waiting for Art to join me. I'm sure he's already up in the lab since he's always at work before me, so I text him when I'm walking in to let him know I'm here.

Before I can get too worked up, the elevator dings, and when the doors open, there's Art. I breathe a sigh of relief.

“Dean Miller. You look anxious. What is wrong?” Art asks.

He seems completely at ease, which is... baffling. Art is way too important to the research to be fired, though, so maybe he’s right not to worry. Me, on the other hand... I’m just a human in a cryptid company, and my expertise is probably something they could find elsewhere.

I breathe out again. “Just nervous about how this will go.”

Art joins me at the door to HR. “What is there to be nervous about? I reread the company handbook last night, and there are no guidelines against dating colleagues. We do have a sexual harassment policy, of course, but I am not your boss, and both of us are entering willingly into being temporary mates, so I do not see how that would possibly apply. What concerns you?”

I resist the urge to kiss his confused face. He would reread the company handbook just to make sure we won’t get in trouble. People are not always logical, however, and I don’t think my worries are unfounded. There’s no reason to make Art paranoid, though.

“Let’s go in and see, then,” I say, pulling open the door and making an ‘after you’ gesture to Art.

I’ve never been in the HR suite of offices before—all the forms I had to fill out and any onboarding was done through email. It’s got a long hallway with a few closed doors, but Art confidently walks up to the first door, which has a plaque announcing it’s the office that belongs to the head of HR. He doesn’t even knock before he enters, which makes me cringe a little. Shit, I hope we don’t get off to a bad start.

“Good morning, Harry Ebershoff,” Art declares, and I follow him in, shutting the door behind me. He takes a seat in one of the chairs and gestures me to the other one,

seeming totally at ease. It's so confusing.

I look over at the desk, which is piled high on both sides with papers, handbooks, and folders. In the middle of the mess there's a very old man with a long white beard, and he merely grunts at both of us, not bothering to stop typing.

Art seems content to sit and wait, so I follow his lead. He called the guy by name, after all, so maybe he knows him.

Harry eventually finishes typing and looks up. "What have you done now, Art?" he grumbles. His voice is low and craggy, and he sounds a bit like he's gargling rocks. I'm betting he's not human, but I'm not really sure what he is.

"Dean Miller and I have entered into a temporary mate partnership," Art states.

Harry peers up at him, then over at me. "Have you now?" he asks me.

I nod my head. "Yes, we're dating, and I thought maybe it was best if we let HR know to avoid any issues."

"Hmph," he grunts. "Were you getting it on in the workplace?" he asks.

"I... what?" I sputter.

"Bumping uglies. Fornicating. Playing where's the sausage. Knocking boots. In other words, having sexual relations involving genitalia, mouths, and/or hands." He stares at Art for the last part of that statement.

"We have not engaged in any sexual activities in our workplace, although the handbook does not expressly forbid such things. I did read it again last night," Art comments.

“Policy H5402 clearly states—” Harry starts, but Art cuts him off.

“We shall not have any sexual relations in the lab, of course. That would be highly unsanitary, and it might disrupt the samples. The sexual harrassment policy also makes it quite clear that we cannot engage in any relations which might make others uncomfortable, so of course we would not have sexual relations in an area where others might stumble onto us. That would be inappropriate,” Art says stiffly.

“Hmph,” Harry grunts again. “Well, at least you know that much. Although I shouldn’t be surprised. Your species has always been more private. Not like the damn vampires or the sprites. Still, you can’t be doing the deed on company time, either.”

“As long as we put in our allotted work time each day, our breaks cannot technically be governed by the company, as long as we are not engaging in illegal activities or imbibing mind-altering substances,” Art says.

“Tell that to the demons,” Harry mutters. Then he adds, “Yes, I suppose so. And you always put in plenty of overtime. Alright then. Anything else?”

I feel like I must be on one of those prank shows. I look around the office, kind of wondering if this is being filmed or something. Here I was worried about getting in trouble for dating, and it seems like they’re negotiating when we can have sex at work.

“I...” I start off, but I don’t even know what else to say.

Harry looks at me. “And don’t you be bringing any drama into work. You keep your fights at home and don’t distract Art from his work. And if you break up, you either work nice together or come down for a transfer, but don’t be making a hostile work environment, because I don’t have time for that. Are we clear?”

“Of course, Harry Ebershoff. I’m glad we could come to a satisfactory conclusion, as always,” Art says, smiling.

Just then Harry’s door bursts open, and a small, winged creature comes flying into the room. “He called me short !” they exclaim, and then they burst into tears.

Harry sighs, and then his head disappears from behind the pile of papers on the desk, and he appears on our side a moment later. He’s probably only four feet tall, and yet he’s still bigger than the winged creature who has landed amidst the papers on his desk.

“Alright, then,” he says, making a shooping motion at us.”Off you go. No sex in the lab or during work time. No drama. No complaints. Art, I’m sure I’ll see you again soon.”

With that, we both get up and leave as he tries to calm down the sobbing winged creature. When we leave and shut the door behind us, I’m still more than a little confused.

“That was...” I start, but again, I don’t know how to finish.

“Dean Miller, I hope this sets your mind at ease,” Art says, and his tentacles lightly brush against me, gesturing toward the elevator.

“You’ve been to see him a lot?” I ask, because I’m still trying to wrap my brain around that whole experience.

“Yes. As you are aware, I have had some issues with previous lab technicians. Harry Ebershoff is a most logical creature, and he knows the handbook quite well. I have found our discussions to always be productive. He is fully aware I do not break the written rules of the workplace,” Art answers, and I don’t think I’m imagining the

smug tone to his voice.

Yes, I can see that Art would make sure not to. It's the unwritten rules and the social cues that he has a hard time following.

“Did he just basically say employees can have sex at work?” I ask, still stuck on that point.

“It is not strictly against company policy, although that has always surprised me. However, I guess when you employ incubi and succubi, you can't very well rule it out completely,” Art answers. He looks at me shyly then. “I have never considered having sexual relations at work before.”

I laugh—I can't help it. Here I was, worried about people finding out we're dating. Meanwhile, we basically got permission to have sex breaks. “Well, Art, that would be another experience I'd be willing to help you with. But maybe after we get some work done for the day,” I joke.

Art smiles at me, and I smile at him, and I'm sort of glad the elevator dinging at our floor interrupts us, because sex at work is sounding better and better.

I knew working for a cryptid company would be different, but even I couldn't guess just how different it would be.

Art

Over the next couple weeks, Dean Miller is a major distraction. He walks into the lab with his ridiculously symmetrical face and soft lips every morning, and instead of giving me a verbal greeting like everyone else, he kisses me. How am I supposed to focus in the morning when I know he's about to make every nerve ending in my body light up like a firework?

Sometimes he approaches from behind and wraps his warm arms around me while I'm trying to look through a microscope. It's highly unprofessional. We're supposed to be working. But I don't tell him to stop. I've discovered that work is a lot more enjoyable when a handsome man has his arms around me.

Dean Miller takes me with him to a large grove of Christmas trees, all potted by wood nymphs so they'll survive the holiday season. We bring one home and decorate it together with strands of popcorn, candy canes, and the lopsided little ornaments he carved with his dad when he was a child. He teaches me how to make spicy gingerbread and brew eggnog over a fire. I've spent my whole life surrounded by Christmas every December. It's always felt like an invasive species—something unwelcome and unavoidable. But no one's shown me the beauty of it before. Dean Miller has this secret smile that I've only seen when he's rolling out gingerbread dough or trying to haul a Christmas tree that's much too big for his apartment over his shoulder.

I think I'd be willing to suffer through a hundred Christmases if it means seeing that smile on his face.

Between the Christmas trees and the mildly disgusting holiday foods, we have lots of sex. I get to taste him everywhere. I get to push inside him, drag my tentacles across his skin, and kiss every inch of his face. After a lifetime of barely touching anyone, it's overwhelming to get to touch Dean Miller that much. And since that touching generally happens after we've done something festive, I am embarrassed to admit that Christmassy things are somewhat arousing now.

The day we're scheduled to decorate for the work Christmas party begins just like any other. Dean Miller distracts me when he arrives at work. I've already been there for hours, obviously. I get up much earlier than he does. He distracts me several more times throughout the morning with casual touches that don't feel casual at all. I would be annoyed if I didn't like those touches so much. But there's an unexpected turn at lunchtime when he swings by my section of the lab and whispers, "Ready to go?" in my ear.

"I brought a packed lunch today," I say.

"I mean to my apartment. We're making sugar cookies for the party, remember? And then you're going to help me decorate the tree in the conference room where they're holding the holiday party."

I narrow my eyes. "When did I agree to this plan?"

"A couple nights ago when we were in your tub? We were... in the middle of other things. Exciting things."

"You mean engaging in sexual intercourse," I say.

He laughs. "Yes."

"Clearly, my brain was distracted or I would not have agreed to decorate the tree at

work.”

I have not told Dean Miller that I am now aroused by Christmas-related things. It’s something I’d like to keep to myself for as long as possible. That won’t be possible if I develop an erection while hanging ornaments.

“Okay. How about making cookies?” he asks.

“At your apartment?”

He nods. “We might even have time for some other things?”

“You mean sexual intercourse.”

Dean Miller laughs again. Apparently, he thinks sex is very funny. “I’m trying to be subtle here.”

I look around us. We’re the only people in this part of the lab. “Why? We’re alone.”

Unfortunately, Frank walks into the lab, proving me wrong. His eyes light up when he sees us, and he beelines for the corner where Dean Miller and I are standing.

“Just the two people I was hoping to find. I wanted to check in about the people lessons. How is it going?” he asks.

Dean Miller’s smile fades. “It’s fine.”

Frank is holding a cup of coffee, which makes me nervous. Food and drink aren’t allowed in this part of the lab. It’s a safety hazard.

“Do you think Art knows how to be nice now?”

Dean Miller clenches his jaw. “I think he always knew how to be nice.”

“The interns?—”

“We’ve never encouraged to communicate with Art after he offended them. I think some good old-fashioned conflict resolution would have worked just fine. Art isn’t mean. And he’s right here. You can talk to him.” Dean Miller’s voice is clipped and even. It’s such a contrast to the warm tone he uses with me.

Frank’s gaze darts from Dean Miller to me, then back to Dean Miller again. “We’re feeling a little prickly today, aren’t we? This wouldn’t have anything to do with the new romantic relationship the two of you are in, would it?”

Dean Miller shakes his head.

“What do you think, Art? Are the people lessons working?” Frank asks.

I stand there, unable to answer as quickly as Dean. I can’t deny that I’m awkward with people. I offend them without meaning to. It’s incredibly difficult for me to connect with them the way I connect with Lisa or other members of my family. But I’ve connected with Dean.

“Yes,” I say honestly. “Dean Miller has helped me a lot.”

Frank smiles. “That’s good to hear. I would hate to have to put you on probation after all of Dean’s effort. I trust that there won’t be any more problems with the interns.”

“If there are, you can send Art and the intern to HR, right? Isn’t that what Harry is there for?” Dean asks.

Frank glares at him. “Obviously, we want to avoid escalating things to HR whenever

we can.”

“You mean you’d rather let people quit than use the proper channels to handle conflict in the lab,” Dean says.

Frank raises his eyebrows. “That’s an interesting take for someone who is so... how should I phrase it? Expendable.” He flashes a smile that makes my stomach twinge. That isn’t a good smile.

Dean Miller watches Frank walk out of the lab without saying another word. Which is surprising, because I thought he’d tell Frank he isn’t expendable. He was certainly willing to defend me. Why wouldn’t he do the same for himself?

“I need to learn how to keep my mouth shut,” Dean Miller says. “Or I might not have a job.”

“If he fires you, we can go to Harry Ebershoff.”

Dean slides his arm across my back and gives me a half-hug. “Thank you. That is actually very comforting. Between the two of you, I’m sure you could come up with some kind of solution. But it’s never good to have a boss who hates you.”

Does Frank hate Dean because he defended me? That doesn’t seem fair. A part of me wishes that I’d never agreed to people lessons with Dean, especially if he loses his job over this.

“C’mon, let’s go make some Christmas cookies,” Dean says, holding out his hand to me. I take it, even though I’m still concerned about his impending Christmas tree decoration plans and my possible erections.

We still haven’t had sex at work. Maybe it’s time to figure out how to make that

happen.

Dean

Art takes my hand, and then his tentacles wrap around me as well. I try not to shiver at the feeling—now is not the time to get turned on.

“How late will you need to stay to make up the lab time after decorating the tree?” Art asks me. I notice he doesn’t include himself in that, probably because he already comes in early and stays late all the time.

“We technically have the afternoon off,” I tell him, grinning. “HR always lets people who decorate for the holiday party take the afternoon off. It’s one of the perks of helping out, even though we’re sometimes here until after work hours anyway. I really think they do it so if anyone sips a bit of apple cider wine or spiked eggnog while we decorate, no one is on the clock.”

“So we are technically not on work hours right now?” Art asks suspiciously.

“That’s right!” I say, turning to head out of the lab.

Only Art turns and pulls me in the opposite direction, back toward the supply and break room. Maybe he wants to store his lab coat? We weren’t in the clean room—our lab has a few separate areas—but I realize it isn’t a bad idea to leave my lab coat here too.

We get into the lab break room and Art closes the door. There’s a few chairs and a small table, and Art and I have eaten lunch here a few times when we didn’t feel like heading to the cafeteria or going out.

I take off my lab coat and hang it on one of the hooks by the lockers. I turn around and... Art's lab coat is off. But so are his shoes. And his pants are unbuttoned.

And that's where he seems to have stopped—mid-undressing. I get the impression that Art has something fun in mind for the break room, and I am one hundred percent on board for any ideas he might have.

Art isn't nearly as shy with me about sex as he used to be, but he still likes to check in before we try anything new—and to make sure I'm in the mood (which I pretty much always am with him). Yes, I'm still vaguely worried about Frank's threat, but mainly because I love working with Art so much. Being intimate with Art is exactly what I need right now to put those worries aside.

I smile and wink at him to let him know I am definitely in before I grab a chair and slide it under the break room door handle. That ought to be warning enough in case anyone comes back here. I'm not worried, though—Art and I are the only ones working in this lab right now.

Art's watching me, and I can see the tent in his underwear where he unzipped his pants. I saunter over and wrap my arms around him.

“Art, were you thinking of doing something fun at work?” I tease, rubbing myself against him.

“It is not, strictly speaking, against company policy...” Art begins, but then he trails off as he looks at my mouth and I grind a little harder against him.

“What fun things did you have in mind that are ‘not against company policy’?” I ask.

“I would like to taste you, Dean Miller. With my mouth,” he clarifies, and I can't help the groan that escapes me.

We've had sex a bunch of times, and his tentacles are so damn good that somehow we've never really gotten to the blowjob side of things. The idea is crazy hot, though. Not only would I love Art's mouth on me, but I want to see Art come undone in a place where he's always so formal. I want to taste him—after all, his tentacles have already gotten a taste of me.

I push his pants down, freeing his already hard cock, and I push him backwards into one of the chairs in the room.

He sits down, stating, "I am not sure how I am supposed to put your penis in my mouth if I am sitting in a chair."

I just laugh. "You'll get your turn," I answer. "Your tentacles have tasted me, but I've never gotten to taste you, and I want to."

He groans at my words. I unbutton my own pants, freeing my erection. Art looks hungrily at me, and one of his tentacles reaches out to slide along my length. I moan. Fuck, I love his tentacles.

I drop to my knees in front of him, looking up into his eyes. Art's breath catches as he looks down at me. I marvel at the fact that I'm on my knees in front of the sexy, cute cryptid I used to have a crush on. He means so much to me, and my chest clenches with the intensity of how much I care for him.

"I have never had anyone taste me like this," Art says, and his cock jumps a little when I look back down at it.

He looks delicious, and I lick along his length, getting his cock nice and wet as his breathing speeds up. I lift my eyes and watch his face as I take him into my mouth.

He groans, and I pull off to say, "You taste delicious, Art. Like tasting the ocean

waves.”

That only seems to turn him on more as I mouth his length again, eventually sucking the head into my mouth. I rub my tongue along the tip and down the sensitive underside, and his tentacles wrap around my body like a hug. I reach a hand up to grip the base of his dick, and I begin moving up and down along him, letting my spit slick the way.

“Dean,” he whispers, and I can’t help smiling around his cock. I love making him lose my last name.

Giving Art a blowjob is fun, and I love having a hard dick in my mouth. Art’s responses are even better. His thighs quiver, his tentacles gently caress my back and neck, and his breathing gets rough. I love making him feel this good, and I want to taste his cum in my mouth.

I let my tongue dip into his slit on my upward glide, and he barely suppresses another moan. One of his tentacles slides down my body, and I feel it grab onto my dick. It suctions on, and... holy shit. It pulsates and sucks where it’s attached, and I can’t help the moan that comes out.

The vibration must feel good to Art, because he starts moaning, and I can tell by his clenching thighs that he’s getting close. I speed up, moaning softly and letting the tip of his cock slide into my throat, where I swallow around him.

He comes with a long exhalation, and I swallow as he pumps into my mouth. He’s salty but not bitter, and I’m reminded again of the ocean as I drink him down. I slow my movement and milk the last of his seed, and then I gently pull off, resting my head against his thigh, breathing heavily.

His tentacle is still wrapped around my cock, and I’m hard as a rock, but I’m also

satisfied that I got to taste Art. I smile into his skin and press a kiss to his thigh.

“That was amazing, Dean Miller. I did not last long, but you did state that I would get my turn,” Art says, and I look up to see him staring at me. His tentacle is still softly wrapped around my hard dick, and it gives a squeeze, making me groan. Art manages to lift me to my feet as he stands up, and he places me in the chair and kneels in front of me. It’s so sexy when he moves me around with his arms and tentacles.

He stares intently at my cock as his tentacle uncurls and pulls off of it.

“You look hungry, Art,” I laugh. “Should I be worried about cephalopod mating practices?” I ask.

Art chuckles—a sound I love to hear, since he so rarely laughs—and says, “I am hungry, Dean Miller.”

His mouth is on my cock in the next breath, and god, it feels good. He’s sloppy and wet as he twirls his tongue around my length, and he moans a little as he licks. That’s only more of a turn on—I love knowing that he’s enjoying himself, and it feels amazing to have his mouth on me.

He pulls off, licking at the precum on the tip of my cock. “You are very tasty, Dean Miller. My mouth enjoys your flavors.”

I groan as he sucks me back down. The juxtaposition of his serious words and his sexy actions always get me fired up. But lately I find nearly everything Art does sexy as fuck.

His tentacle slides along my thigh, and I groan, saying, “Yes.”

Art takes the hint, and he’s probing at my ass with one slick tentacle. I will never get

over the self-lubing thing, and as the tip slips into my ass, I moan again. His warm, wet mouth is bobbing along my cock, and his tentacle is sliding deeper into my ass, and I can barely contain the sounds that want to come pouring out of me. Thank god we don't share walls with another break room or lab.

Another tentacle comes up and gently presses a sucker against my nipple, and then it pulls ever so slightly.

“Fuck, Art,” I pant.

I like when Art fucks me deep and hard, but that doesn't seem to be his goal right now. His tentacle finds my prostate, and the tip flicks against it, causing my entire body to shiver. I gasp as he continues to rub against my insides, pluck at my nipple, and lick around the head of my cock. As much as I want this to last forever, I feel the pressure building in my body. I was already so fired up from sucking his dick, and the things he's doing to me feel insanely amazing. There's so much sensation everywhere.

I go rigid, barely containing my orgasm, panting for breath and trying to hold on to the pleasure. I look down and see Art staring up at me, and it sends me over the edge. My hips are bucking up into Art's mouth, my legs are spasming, I'm groaning loudly, and I feel like there are sparks shooting throughout my body.

It goes on and on, and eventually Art's tentacle gently slides out of my ass, and his mouth gently releases me. His tentacles wrap around my entire body like a hug, and he gently kisses the tip of my softening cock.

“Dean Miller, I have enjoyed tasting you, and I think we should do this again,” he comments.

I can only shakily laugh. “Yes. Definitely on the to do again list. Just wait until we try

sixty-nining,” I answer.

He looks up at me quizzically, and I pull him up, hugging him. I will absolutely explain what sixty-nining is, but not right now. We have cookies to bake, a tree to decorate, and hopefully all the time in the world to explore the sexy things Art hasn’t done yet—and the many sexy things we have done and want to do again.

I can’t wait.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:15 pm

Art

Walking through the city with my hand intertwined with Dean's feels natural now. We move with a familiar rhythm that's as easy as weaving through the foot traffic on my own. He talks about the sugar cookie recipe we're about to make as we walk. It's his aunt's, so he tells me about her too. I love the way he shares his memories with me, never pausing for a specific kind of reaction, the way other people do. He just talks until he's done with his train of thought, and he only expects me to say something in return if I want to.

His apartment smells of cinnamon when we enter. It's the scented pine cones we bought at the grocery store a few days ago—another one of his many Christmas traditions.

"We got too many pine cones, Dean Miller. Your apartment smells like a strong cup of tea," I say.

He inhales deeply through his nose. "Mmm. I disagree. That is exactly the right amount of scented pinecone goodness." He unzips his coat and bends down to peel off his boots. I shamelessly stare at his ass. He's mentioned on more than one occasion that I'm allowed to stare as much as I like, so I intend to.

He looks over his shoulder. "Enjoying the view?"

"Yes."

He flashes a grin at me that makes my insides do a little somersault. I don't think I'll

ever get over what it feels like to have Dean Miller smile at me.

“I promised my mom that I’d take a picture of us baking cookies,” he says, walking over to the fridge and opening it up. “She’s very curious about you.”

“Oh. You, um, told your mother about me?” That surprises me. I thought the only people in his life who knew about me were our coworkers.

He grabs two lemons and deposits them on the counter. “Yeah. Is that okay? I figured since I’ve met Lisa, you wouldn’t mind.”

“Yes, that’s fine.” I hold back a smile. Dean Miller must think our temporary mateship is going well if he told his mother about me.

He walks around the kitchen, pulling bags of sugar, flour, and salt out of his cupboards. For a while, I just watch him get everything ready for us. He’s already caught up in the moment, a hint of that secret smile on his lips.

“Did you ever bake with your family growing up?” he asks.

“Not really.”

He pauses, a big metal bowl in his hands. “Are you not very close to them?”

“We’re very close.” I walk around the counter and pull out my phone. I’m not in the practice of sharing pictures of my family with other people. I don’t have any social media accounts, and I certainly don’t show my coworkers photos of my parents. But Dean Miller has shared so many of his family’s traditions with me.

“Have you read about the effect of laughter on the immune system?” I ask.

“I think so. It lowers your cortisol levels, right? So your immune system is more effective?”

I nod. “That’s why my mother tries to make me laugh every day. She wants me to be well.” I pull up the text window I share with my mother. In it, there are hundreds of photos of her posing for goofy photos with my father. I hand my phone to Dean. He scrolls through their animated facial expressions and silly props. Sometimes they’re wearing costumes or making shadow puppets with their tentacles.

“I was much smaller than the other boys in junior high. People made fun of my size often. It was very stressful. My parents bought me a phone in eighth grade and sent me photos to help me through the day,” I say.

Dean Miller looks up at me. “Really? That’s so sweet.”

“Yes. They are sweet. We don’t bake together, but we do other things. My dad organizes a complex scavenger hunt every year for my birthday. It usually takes me a week or longer to solve all the puzzles and find my gift. We like to travel to warmer beaches and swim every time they can take a break from work. They’re my favorite people. Plus Lisa, of course.”

“Of course.” He hands my phone back to me. “So what you’re saying is that we need to take a trip to the beach together.”

The idea of traveling to a beach with Dean is nice.

“If that wouldn’t be too much trouble.”

He laughs. “I assure you that going to a beach with you wouldn’t be too much trouble at all. Tell you what, if you can suffer through all my Christmas traditions, I’ll plan a weekend getaway for us in January, complete with a warm beach.”

My cheeks grow hot. That is the most romantic thing anyone has ever said to me, and I never knew I wanted romance. But Dean offering to plan a vacation for us to a warm beach is absolutely something I want.

I wonder what I could do to make him as happy as he makes me.

“Thank you, Dean Miller. How can I make the sugar cookie baking experience optimal for you?”

He grins and hands me a lemon. “First, we have to turn on some Christmas music. It’s tradition. And not even good Christmas music. My grandma likes the really old songs that are slightly obnoxious. I hope you don’t mind.”

“I don’t mind at all, as long as we record the especially obnoxious parts and send the audio file to my mother. She will be amused, and therefore, less likely to get sick.”

“That’s adorable, Art. You really are such a sweet guy. You know what else reduces cortisol levels?” Dean Miller slides his hand along my jaw and brings me in for a gentle kiss.

“You mean sexual intercourse.”

He busts up laughing. “Yes.”

I guess that gives me another excuse to have sex with Dean Miller. After all, I want him to be well.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:15 pm

Dean

Baking Christmas cookies with Art is so much better than baking alone. He's very precise in following the recipe, and I love bumping into him in the kitchen. Every time one of his tentacles reaches over to rest along my back or just lightly touch my arm, I feel a burst of happiness.

Now that I've thought of the idea of going away with Art, I can't wait to plan the trip. He's stayed over at my place, and I've stayed over at his, and I know we'll have a fantastic time on a vacation together.

Art is just fun to be with—he makes me laugh, he appreciates me, and he makes me feel special. And, of course, there's the sex, which is amazing. But just hanging out with Art is pretty amazing too. I feel like I just get him and he gets me. He really listens, not like most people, who seem like they're just waiting to talk about themselves or solve your problems for you. And he shares so much of himself in return, like the photos of his parents. Art is also brilliant, but he makes me feel smart too. I love it when he explains something to me, but I also love that he trusts me enough to ask me questions.

If Frank wasn't such an asshole, I would send him flowers for making sure we spent more time together. I've known Art for ages as a coworker, but dating him... I don't think I've ever been happier.

Art is quickly becoming an integral part of my life. I can picture myself living with him, working with him, spending holidays and vacations with him...

I see Art in my future, and it hits me that maybe I'm in love with him.

I stop in the middle of taking cookies off the pan, and Art looks over, noticing that I stopped. "This song seems to distress you, Dean Miller. Would you like me to change it?"

I pay attention for the first time to what's playing—it's "Baby It's Cold Outside." I can't help the laugh that escapes me, and I start taking cookies off the tray again.

"Nah, I just had a thought. This song is sort of a holiday classic, and I promise it isn't as creepy as it sounds," I say.

Art looks dubious. "Dean Miller, the male is trying to get the female to drink and smoke more so she cannot leave and so that her judgment is impaired. How is that not creepy?"

I put the tray in the sink after I remove the last cookie, thinking about the lyrics. "You're right, but I don't think they meant it to sound like that. They've actually remade the song to make it less... creepy."

Art nods his head approvingly and then starts washing the rest of the dishes with his hands and his tentacles. I start thinking about the things those tentacles can do, but our office orgasms weren't that long ago, and we do have to get back to decorate the tree.

I want to capture this moment, though, so I hold out my phone and lean in to kiss Art, snapping a picture. I look at the phone and can't help a chuckle. Art leans over to check the picture, too. In the photo one of his tentacles is hovering behind me with soap suds on it, and it looks like it's about to squeeze my ass.

"I controlled my tentacle for your comfort, Dean Miller. I did not think you would

enjoy soggy pants,” he says.

“Art, for you I’d manage with wet pants,” I laugh. I send the picture off to my mom, even though Art looks appalled when he sees who I’m sending it to.

“Don’t worry. She’s going to think it’s fantastic,” I reassure him as he finishes up the dishes and wipes his hands and tentacles on a dish towel.

Sure enough, barely a minute passes before her reply comes back—”Awww, so cute!!!” with about twelve heart eye emojis, kissy faces, laughing faces, and cookie emojis.

I show him before I put my phone away, asking Art, “Are you ready to head back to the office? Do you need anything else to eat?” We’d nibbled on food—I always kept some of Art’s favorite seafood in the apartment in case he was over, but we hadn’t really done a sit-down lunch.

Art looks at the time. “I have had sufficient sustenance until dinner time. Have you, Dean Miller? If so, it is time to go decorate the tree. It seems we will have to wait until later to lower our cortisol levels.”

I smile, grabbing Art’s face again and giving him a kiss. We put our coats and hats back on, and Art grabs the cookies with his tentacles so we can hold hands when we leave my apartment. Art has reminded me how much I love Christmas, and I can’t wait to share another tradition with him.

Most of the decorating crew is already hard at work in the large conference room that holds the holiday party, and the sound of Christmas carols, talking, and laughing fills the air. Hazel bounds over to us—she’s decked out in a green pointy hat and pointy shoes, but the pointy ears are all hers. She’s a wood nymph, and she’s usually in charge of the decorating. Despite not celebrating Christmas herself, she loves the

festivity of the holiday. In fact, a lot of the folks that decorate aren't human. I think it's just a good excuse for the cheery employees to have a little fun.

"Dean! Glad you could make it! And you brought a friend!" she cries out.

"I did. He's my boyfriend, actually, and he works with me in the lab. Hazel, this is Art. Art, this is Hazel," I introduce.

"Lovely to meet you! You're going to come in very handy!" she beams.

Then she grabs Art by the arm and drags him off toward the tree. He has a moment to look back at me, slightly panicked, so I smile reassuringly and follow them.

"Gina, a little higher, please!" Hazel calls out to a sprite who's hanging up garland. She flutters higher, and a bigfoot named Roger hands her some tape.

A few fae are setting up the tables that will hold the food and drinks, and Hazel makes a tsk sound before she lets Art's arm go and takes the cookies from him. "I've told them that they simply cannot be in charge of food at a public party with humans. Let me go check on them. You guys can handle the tree, right? Boxes of decorations are over there!" she points, and then she's off, mumbling to herself as she heads toward the fae.

Art looks down at the boxes, which look like they're vomiting Christmas. There's garland and lights and ornaments all thrown in together, and I silently curse not taking down the decorations myself last year.

"This does not look well organized, Dean Miller," Art states.

"Nope. I should have known better than to leave putting the decorations away to a bunch of pixies last year," I sigh. "It's really ok if you'd rather work in the lab than

help me with this, Art,” I say, feeling a little overwhelmed by the mess for a moment. I wanted this to be fun, not a tedious task.

Art’s tentacles reach out and rest along my back. “I would like to help. This mess is too big for one person. Besides, I would enjoy spending time with you more than working.” He shrugs, as if that isn’t a big deal, but I know him well enough to be flattered.

A brownie wanders over to help us, and between the three of us, we manage to unpack the boxes and untangle the mess.

Art’s hands and tentacles are invaluable, and getting the garland and lights up probably takes half the time it did last year. Lots of folks meander over to chat and help, and Art seems a little shocked that everyone keeps talking to him. We chat about the different jobs we do, local restaurants, and even the best cafeteria food.

When Art points out that some of the hanging decorations are crooked, he gets dragged over to help fix it. He ends up in an intense discussion with a ningen on the best places to get fish nearby, and I continue hanging ornaments, feeling pleased by how well Art is getting along with everyone. He really has gotten more comfortable with others over the past weeks. I don’t think it’s anything I’ve said, just that he’s had a little more practice.

Or maybe it’s because I’ve managed to lower his cortisol levels.

By the time he comes back, I can tell he’s feeling friendly with these folks, and we joke as we continue to decorate. I take my time leaning over to hang a few ornaments on the bottom of the tree, because I love teasing Art and letting him ogle me. When I turn around, he’s standing there staring, an ornament on each tentacle and in each hand, all of them stretched out toward me. He kinda looks like a Christmas tree all on his own.

I laugh, and I pull out my phone for a quick picture before I walk over and hug him.

“Dean Miller, I would like to return your hug, but I am afraid I will crush the ornaments,” he murmurs.

“That’s ok.” I kiss him lightly and grab a glass snowflake off his tentacle. “I just couldn’t resist. Although maybe I shouldn’t kiss you in a room full of coworkers?” I ask, wondering how Art feels about PDA at work. After all, usually it is just Art and I in the lab.

“We are off work hours,” Art reminds me. “And if the vampires can be drunk on mulled wine blood, I do not think anyone will find fault with a kiss.”

I look over, and sure enough, a group of vampires are splayed out on chairs with wine cups in front of them, and I think the table decorations they’re working on are starting to look decidedly messier.

I smile as I hug Art again. “Thank you so much for decorating with me, Art. I can’t wait until I get to show you off at the holiday party tomorrow night.”

Art blushes a bit, which is adorable, and I turn around to reach up and hang an ornament, winking at him over my shoulder. We should get done tonight with plenty of time to lower our cortisol levels, and despite our afternoon quickie in the lab, I can’t get enough of my cephalopod.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:15 pm

Art

Lisa eyes my outfit with obvious distaste. If I didn't know her so well, I wouldn't notice her disapproval because she's wearing a face mask, but I do know her, and her disgust is evident. "That sweater is ugly."

"Yes, that is the point. Dean Miller said it's a tradition for people to wear ugly sweaters to Christmas parties."

She grimaces. "But it has puffballs, Art. Surely you don't have to wear something with puffballs."

I look down at the sweater in question. It is, in fact, spectacularly hideous, and it does have a puff ball. "That's the top of Santa's hat. It's festive."

"Dean must be amazing in bed if you're willing to wear that for him. The Santa looks a little like those troll dolls."

I'm just about to explain to her that Santa is a fictitious character, and so it doesn't matter that he looks like a troll, when the doorbell rings. Lisa saunters over to the door and opens it. On the other side, Dean Miller is waiting with a sweater of his own. His has an octopus wearing a Santa hat on the front.

It's adorable, which is unfair. I thought we were supposed to wear something ugly.

"What do you think?" he asks, holding his arms out to show off his sweater.

Lisa shakes her head. “An octopus would never wear a Santa hat. Do you have any idea how impractical hats are under water?”

Dean Miller smiles at her good-naturedly. “Okay. One vote no. How about you, Art? Do you like it?”

“Yes,” I admit, folding my arms across my chest.

Dean Miller’s smile fades. “But you don’t want to like it?”

“No. My sweater is ugly, Dean Miller. And your sweater is delightful. That isn’t fair.”

He throws back his head and laughs. When he laughs like that, it’s hard to stay angry with him. He’s too breathtaking.

Damn Dean Miller and his aesthetically pleasing everything.

“We should leave, otherwise we will be late,” I say.

He glances at the clock by the kitchen cabinets. “We still have time. Would you like to switch sweaters? I don’t mind.”

“The party starts in fifteen minutes.”

He shrugs. “It would be fine if we were fashionably late.”

“Tardiness is not fashionable, even if you’re wearing a nice sweater.”

Lisa walks toward the door. “That isn’t true, actually. Tardiness is fashionable in regards to parties. But I should go. I need to rinse off my face and pack for my flight

tomorrow. I have a tournament in Prague this week.”

Dean Miller waves at her. “Good luck!”

“I won’t need any luck,” she tells him, matter-of-factly. “I’m the best player who registered for the tournament.”

With that, she walks off.

“What I wouldn’t give to have that kind of confidence,” Dean says.

“You do have confidence. It’s one of my favorite things about you.”

Dean turns to me, a soft smile on his face. “Thanks, Art. That’s sweet. Are you ready to go? We don’t have to be fashionably late, if that isn’t your thing. I just thought you’d rather wear a sweater you liked.” He holds out his hand to me. He’s wonderfully dashing with his nice sweater and the thick scarf around his neck. I still can’t believe he’s my temporary mate.

“I think I’d rather look at you wearing that sweater than wear it myself,” I say, taking his hand and letting him guide me out of my apartment. We get to the elevator before I remember that it’s 5:45 on a Friday night. That’s my parents’ date night. Every week they go out to dinner together at 6:00, which means that the elevator slides open to reveal my mother in her latest “little black dress.” She has a whole closet-full of them because my father once said she looked good in black. He’s standing next to her in his best suit and cufflinks. They dress up every week for each other. When I was younger, I loved watching the way they stared at each other before they left for dinner.

I’ve always wanted someone to look at me like that.

Mom's face lights up when she sees us. "Good evening, Art. There's plenty of space for more in the elevator."

I step inside, tugging Dean behind me. "Mom, Dad, this is Dean Miller."

Dean releases my hand and holds it out to my mother. "It's wonderful to meet you."

Instead of shaking his hand, she wraps her arms around him for a hug, extending her tentacles out to hug him with those too. Dad also extends his tentacles, ready and waiting the moment she finishes with Dean. He gives Dean a hug before Dean has a chance to greet him. And it isn't a mild, polite hug either. He almost squeezes the life out of Dean.

A lot of people think of cephalopods as cold, but we aren't. At least not with the people we love.

Dean Miller makes an alarming strangled noise.

"Dad, Dean can't breathe," I say.

He releases Dean and steps back. "I apologize. Art has never introduced us to a boy before."

"A man," Mom corrects him. "You must come to dinner, Dean. We would like to get to know you better. Also, we would like to meet your parents."

My stomach twists in a knot. In cephalopod culture, all of that would be normal and welcome when someone introduces a mate to their parents. But Dean Miller and I are temporary mates, and we haven't been together long. I'm not sure what the social protocol is in our current arrangement.

The elevator door slides open. We've made it to the lobby.

"I would love to come to dinner. What day would work for you?" Dean asks.

"Next week." Mom hands him her phone. "Please add yourself as a contact."

"Mom, Dean might not want?—"

Dean gives me a quick kiss on the lips. "Don't worry." He takes Mom's phone and inputs his number. He has no idea what a frequent and aggressive texter she is, especially during the winter months. She'll be asking him about his health way more often than is probably appropriate.

"What is your favorite food?" Dad asks.

Dean glances at me. "Oh, um, I like anything."

"That's nice. What is your favorite?" Dad repeats.

"Uh, lasagna? But like I said, I'm good with anything."

Dad smiles. "I will find you the best lasagna in the city."

Mom winds a few of her tentacles around his arm and pulls him forward. "We should not interrupt their date. They have a party to get to, otherwise Art would not be wearing that horrible sweater. Have fun! I'll text you details about dinner tomorrow, Dean. Please bring your family tree and corresponding medical history."

Oh my God . This is mortifying. Sure, it's standard practice for cephalopod shifters to compare family medical histories and ancestry prior to mating. We're a small community and have a strong commitment to genetic diversity. But none of that is

relevant in this situation.

“Mom, he’s human and we’re gay,” I remind her.

She waves my concern away. “I refuse to treat him differently just because he’s a human man. I’m not prejudiced.” Before I can argue further, she drags Dad off. He waves to us, promising Dean once again to find the perfect lasagna.

I turn to Dean Miller with my heart in my throat, not sure how he’ll react to their intensity. But he’s just watching them walk off, that secret smile on his face.

“They’re great,” he says.

I wring my hands together. “Yeah? You think so?”

“Yeah.” He steps out of the elevator and drags me with him. “Lucky for them, my mom is obsessive about family history. She’ll be thrilled when I ask her for our family tree. It will make her year.”

Maybe my eyes get a little watery at that. After all, I love my parents more than anything. How can I not get emotional when Dean admits to liking them, even though my mom accosted him for his family medical history? It’s only reasonable to have an emotional reaction.

“Thank you,” I say.

“Of course.”

He acts like it’s nothing. Which means he must not know why my mom wants to know his family’s medical history.

“She doesn’t quite understand the temporary part of temporary mates. That isn’t done in cephalopod culture,” I explain.

He squeezes my hand. “I know. It’s okay. And maybe this doesn’t have to be temporary.”

The thought had occurred to me. It seemed more like a pipe dream than a true possibility, but there was a time when I thought sexual intercourse with him was a pipe dream too.

“Just so you know, my father will find you the best lasagna in the city. He’s excellent at research,” I say.

Dean chuckles. “Why am I not surprised?”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:15 pm

Dean

The normally boring conference room has been transformed into a festive Christmas wonderland. Even though Art and I were both here for the decorating, there's something magical about seeing it at night with all the twinkling lights and the tree shining in the corner.

Beside me, I hear Art take a deep breath in. "Dean Miller, it reminds me of the bioluminescent beaches in the Maldives my parents and I visited a few years ago. We did a lovely and thorough job with the decorating."

"We totally did," I agree.

We're standing just inside the door, marveling at the decorations, when James comes over holding two glasses out towards us. "Good! You're here! I got you guys eggnog, and I nabbed a table over there for us to sit at."

He gestures toward a table filled with a variety of humans and cryptids that James and I are both friendly with. I smirk at James as I see Bob, the bigfoot security guard he's been crushing on, sitting at our table. I grab the drinks, handing one to Art, and then I lean over and ask, "James, are you finally chatting with Bob?"

James blushes, then looks back nervously at the table. "He just sat with us. In the chair next to mine."

I clap James on the back with my free hand. "Well, go talk to him! Just do it before you dip into the eggnog," I laugh.

James walks back to the table, and Art asks, “Is there something in the eggnog that would make James unsuitable for talking to others? I have read about this drink, and it does apparently contain raw eggs, which can be harmful to the human system if certain bacteria are present. However, I’m sure our company knows this and would have only purchased pasteurized eggnog for human consumption.”

“I’m sure they probably did, but it’s also spiked. They add alcohol to the eggnog every year, and James can be a bit... well, his people skills aren’t so good when he’s had alcohol,” I laugh.

“Perhaps I should not drink the eggnog either, since my people skills often seem deficient,” Art replies, looking skeptically at the drink in his hand like it might be about to bite him.

I laugh again, ready to reassure Art, when I hear Frank’s voice over my shoulder. “Yes, Art, your people skills really don’t need to become any more deficient than they already are.”

We both turn around, and there’s our harpy boss. I have to literally bite my tongue from telling him off for saying that to Art. We’re at the holiday party, for fuck’s sake. Can the man not ever be nice?

I look over at Art, who has sort of deflated a bit. Even his tentacles look limp and lifeless, and I’m reminded of when he told me he got made fun of in school by bullies. That’s what Frank is right now—just another bully picking on Art.

Fuck it. Boss or not, it doesn’t give him the right to be an asshole.

“Maybe Art isn’t the one who needs people skills, Frank, since you seem pretty deficient in the area of knowing how to treat people with respect,” I say, then I grab Art’s arm and pull him off toward our table of friends without waiting for a reply.

Holiday music is playing in the background, but apparently it isn't playing loudly enough, or I was angrier than I realized, because everyone stares at us when we get to the table. I pull out a chair for Art and then sit next to him.

His tentacles wrap around me, squeezing along my shoulders and neck like a hug, and I let out a breath, realizing I'm still scowling. I grab Art's hand and turn to ask if he's ok. He's looking at me like I just mapped an entire microsatellite of repetitive DNA in record time, and I stare back, getting lost in his gaze.

"Holy shit, that was awesome," James murmurs, and Bob grunts in agreement.

That breaks the moment between Art and I, and I laugh self-consciously. "I didn't mean to be so loud," I admit. "Is he looking over here?"

"Yup!" Willow, a friend who works with James, answers. "And he looks furious. But then harpies always look cranky to me, so who knows."

"Hopefully I still have a job by next week," I mutter, then I shake off the worry. "But we're here to have fun, and I refuse to let Frank ruin one of my favorite work events. Besides, I'm sure he won't stay long." The bosses always make an appearance at the holiday party, but Frank is usually one of the first to leave.

I lean over to give Art a kiss, and he's got the loveliest little smile on his face as he looks at me. I can't help leaning my forehead against his, and most of the table gives a sweet "Awww" sound at the two of us before they get back to their conversation, which was apparently about the latest cryptid reality show, which half the table watches.

"Do not worry, Dean Miller. I will not let you lose your job over this," Art reassures me.

I'm not sure what he can do if Frank sets me in his crosshairs, but that's a problem for later me. I mean it—I will not let that asshole ruin our evening. Frank leaves the party after about twenty minutes, and I breathe a sigh of relief that he's gone.

We laugh and joke with the table, and a lot of the decorating crew comes over to chat with us as well. Art seems amazed that so many people talk to him—I don't think he realized how friendly most of the people we work with really are. I don't blame him for not knowing. He's naturally shy, and if he was mostly subjected to Frank and the interns who clearly didn't get him, then he wouldn't have found his people at work. When I hear Art deep in conversation with a gorgon about the frailty of the human digestive tract and the consumption of raw eggs while they drink eggnog, I know that he's finally found his people.

We drink eggnog—I think the gorgon is the one who convinces him to try it—we talk to tons of people, and we snack on all the food the company brought in. When they judge the ugliest sweaters, Art is delighted that he gets an honorable mention ribbon, and I don't think I've ever seen him smile so much at a social event.

We're swaying on the dance floor, and Art's tentacles are wrapped around me, but one is holding his ribbon out. "I'm going to hang this up in a place of honor," he states. "It is the only non-science related prize I have ever won."

A tentacle reaches down to pat my ass, and Art holds me more tightly. He hasn't had much eggnog, but it seems just a little bit has made him more handsy... or should I say tentacly?

Either way, he's been driving me subtly crazy for the last half hour, those tentacles touching and rubbing, never quite being inappropriate, but definitely making me want more of him.

The party is winding down, and I notice that James and Bob don't seem to be

anywhere in sight. I lean in and whisper, “How about we head home? Your tentacles are driving me crazy, Art.”

I press into him, and I can tell by the widening of his eyes and his blush that he can feel my hard on.

“Yes, Dean Miller, that is an excellent idea.” With that he pulls me off the dance floor and toward the exit to the conference room. I give a wave and yell bye to the rest of our group of friends as we pass by, and they mostly chuckle at our rush for the door.

Luckily the company hires drivers to take people home after the party, and Art and I snag a ride outside the front of the building. It isn’t a long drive, thank god, because Art’s tentacles are wandering, touching my chest, my back, my ass... even grazing my already hard cock, and I have a very difficult time not tackling him in the car.

My place is closer, so we end up going there. Once we’re out of the car, Art presses against my back at the door to my apartment. I fumble with the key, barely able to think straight as his tentacles reach around me, one of them gently undulating against the front of my pants.

“Art,” I gasp. “I’m never gonna get the door open if you keep doing that.”

Art’s tentacle stills, but it’s still lightly pressing against my bulge. I somehow manage to get the key in the door and open it, and Art follows closely behind me.

His tentacles grab onto me as soon as the door is shut, stripping my clothes off. My lips seek out his, and we kiss frantically as we stumble into my bedroom. His lips are warm and soft, and our tongues tangle together. I frantically pull at his clothes, and his tentacles help to strip them off after he’s stripped me.

In a matter of moments we're both naked, and he backs me up onto the bed, where I sprawl out. I love how he looks at me—hungrily, like I'm the sexiest thing he's ever seen. I love how forward he's become, how he isn't so shy anymore and enjoys looking at my body. His cock is rock hard, sticking out in front of him, and his tentacles are reaching out toward me, gently touching my legs and sliding up them.

"I want your sexy tentacles, Art. I want all of you," I tell him.

"Would you like me to penetrate you with my tentacles?" he asks.

I think Art knows that his straightforward talk during sex makes me a little wild, because he's got a little smile on his face as he asks, and one wandering tentacle reaches up to playfully nudge at my balls.

"Yes," I hiss out. "I want you to fuck me. I want you everywhere—inside me, touching me, sucking on me with your tentacles."

"I will taste you everywhere, Dean Miller," Art says, and he crawls onto the bed, hovering over me. One of his tentacles is caressing my face, and I turn my head to suck the tip into my mouth.

Art groans as I explore the tentacle with my tongue. It's silky and firm, and the lubricant it emits is surprisingly tasty—slightly salty yet somehow also refreshing, like a drink of water. The suckers on the tentacle gently press and release against my tongue as I explore, and I suck harder, making Art groan again. I can't believe I haven't tasted his tentacles before. It's surprisingly like having a hard cock in my mouth, and knowing that it gives Art pleasure is turning me on even more.

"Yes, Dean Miller. That feels lovely. I will fill you up everywhere," Art moans.

A tentacle reaches down and softly caresses my hole, rubbing lubricant against me.

It's hot and wet, like a tongue licking me, and I moan around the tentacle in my mouth. Art's other tentacles reach out and gently press my arms against the bed. The tips reach over to my nipples, flicking at them both simultaneously, sending little lightning bolts of sensation through my body.

I moan again, Art's tentacle emitting more lubricant into my mouth. Fuck, it's like he's precumming in my mouth, and that only makes my own dick harder. With that, the tip of his tentacle penetrates my ass, sliding smoothly in, wiggling against my walls.

"You are so very sexy, Dean Miller, and you taste so delicious," Art groans.

I cry out around the tentacle in my mouth as he finds my prostate, gently flicking against it. I know I'm writhing around on the bed in pleasure because I can't control myself, and something—his arms, his legs, his tentacles—I don't know, and I don't care, presses my legs wider and holds them against the bed. I'm barely able to concentrate on sucking him amidst all the pleasure.

I feel like I can come at any moment, and a tentacle reaches around the base of my cock, squeezing it, like Art knows he's driving me to the edge.

He pulls his tentacle out of my mouth, asking, "Are you enjoying this, Dean Miller?"

"Fuck yes," I cry out. "Want you to fuck me, Art. Want you to get pleasure too."

I flick my tongue out to lick along his tentacle again before drawing it back into my mouth. I love the feeling of being filled and surrounded. Art is pressing into me everywhere, gently flicking my nipples and suctioning on my skin in a dozen places. My mouth and my ass are both full of him, and my dick is leaking like crazy as I try not to come. It's like he's turned my entire body into one huge erogenous zone.

The tentacle in my ass withdraws and I mewl in disappointment, but then something thicker is pressing against me, and I know it's Art's dick. I moan in approval, and he presses in.

He's thick and long, and he eases in, stretching me. I'm full of him everywhere, and another squirt of lubricant enters my mouth as he begins moving inside me, fucking my ass with his dick and my mouth with his tentacle. I close my eyes in bliss, letting my tongue lick against him as he fucks my mouth.

He's slowly rocking into me, one tentacle still wrapped around the base of my cock, then there's something wet licking at my hole where his dick is pressing in. My eyes shoot open, and Art is above me, looking down at me.

I nod my head as much as I can without letting go of the tentacle in my mouth, and Art's eyes close in pleasure as the tip of a tentacle slips into me alongside his dick.

Holy fucking shit. The pressure is intense. His tentacle is sliding in alongside his dick, and he latches onto my nipples with suckers, gently pulling at them. I'm sucking at the tentacle in my mouth like it's giving me air as I moan.

"Dean," Art groans out. "Want to taste you everywhere."

I nod again, because isn't he already tasting me everywhere? But then the tentacle curled around the base of my dick slides up, wrapping around me as it goes, secreting Art's lube and curling tightly around my cock. If the grip wasn't tight I'd probably come, but I'm teetering on the edge, my orgasm just out of reach.

I'm moaning steadily now, my mouth and my ass both full, his tentacle gently pushing against my prostate even as he fucks in and out of me with his cock. My nipples are sparks of pleasure where his suckers are latched on, and just when I think I can't take any more, the tip of Art's tentacle brushes against the slit of my dick.

Fuck. He wants to taste me everywhere . I don't even recognize the sound that comes from my throat as the thin tip of a tentacle flicks at and slides into the tip of my cock. Art's tentacle is squeezing and releasing my hardness at the same moment, and I can't hold back.

I scream in pleasure. It's too much—my entire body is one giant nerve ending, raw and exposed. My orgasm barrels out of me, my entire body shaking, spots dancing behind my closed eyelids as I groan. It goes on and on, and I dimly register Art's moan of release even as my body flies apart into a million pieces.

When I come back to reality, I'm snuggled in Art's tentacles, and the bedding is pulled up around us. I vaguely recall Art gently pulling out of me, cleaning us up, and tucking us in, and I snuggle closer to his body.

"Are you awake, Dean Miller?" Art asks sleepily.

"Mmmhmmm," I murmur, because I am, but only barely. My body is sated and snuggled, and my mind is floating in a sea of bliss.

"That was... amazing. You are amazing, Art," I murmur.

"Thank you. Although I'm sure your feelings are partially a natural response to your lower cortisol levels and the rush of endorphins you experienced."

I chuckle and snuggle even closer. "Stay the weekend," I tell Art. "We'll watch Christmas movies and eat snacks and snuggle and do all sorts of endorphin raising activities."

"I would like that, Dean Miller," Art murmurs, his voice soft.

I'd like to ask Art to stay forever, not just the weekend, but logically I know there

isn't any rush. We have plenty of time for those kinds of conversations. I smile as his breathing evens out, and I let myself drift off wrapped up in his warmth.

Dean

The weekend flies by in a blur of cuddles, sex, and Christmas spirit. We go shopping for Christmas presents on Saturday, and Art totally gets into the spirit, even buying a few decorations for his apartment. We stop off at Art's so he can pick up some more clothes, and we have a long soak in his tub (and some more hot tentacle sex, of course).

Sunday, we lounge around and watch Christmas movies, and Art's commentary has me laughing nonstop. I can tell he's amused at the movies despite his incredulity over the whole Santa Claus thing. We end up doing laundry and going grocery shopping together for the week, and even that's fun with Art (and his tentacles come in super handy when it comes to folding laundry—which he of course does meticulously).

Somehow I manage not to think about Frank all weekend, but when we wake up Monday morning to my alarm, that's the first thing that pops into my head. I breathe a heavy sigh out as I shut the alarm off, wondering if I can just call out for the day.

"What is wrong, Dean Miller?" Art asks, his tentacles pulling me back into a snuggle.

"I'm just dreading today. I'm not sure what Frank has in store for me."

Art is quiet for a moment, and then he murmurs sadly, "I am very sorry that you are worried about your job because of me."

I turn around and kiss him, getting lost in the press of our lips and the warmth of him surrounding me. My tongue gently teases at his lips, and we end up kissing deeply,

our mouths slanting against one another.

I eventually pull back and look into Art's eyes. "I'm not sorry. I would defend you against that asshole again in a minute. He shouldn't treat you that way. It isn't okay. And if it means I lose my job because I did what was right, well, that makes it worth it. My biggest regret will be that I won't get to see you every day at work."

"Dean Miller," Art whispers, "I am not worth losing your job?—"

I don't even let him finish. "You are worth everything, Art. I love you. I love being with you and working with you. You're fucking brilliant, and your mind amazes me. More than that, you're funny, and you're sweet, and you're kind. You really care about our work and about people, even if you don't always show it how people expect you to. I love being with you, talking with you, even just doing freaking laundry with you. I would stand up for you to anyone, because I love you, Art."

Art stares at me, and I can't tell if it's wonder or disbelief in his face, but his tentacles are suctioned on to my skin everywhere they can reach so tightly that I know that what I said hasn't made him upset.

"And of course, you're also sexy as hell," I add, smiling.

Art smiles back, then his face grows serious again. "I would like to respond to your declaration with one of my own. I love you too, Dean Miller. I have been hoping that perhaps our role as temporary mates would become something more permanent eventually," Art confesses.

"Me too," I say.

"And you are also 'sexy as hell' and amazing. People like me now thanks to you."

“That’s bullshit, Art. People like you for you . They just didn’t get a chance to know you before, and they weren’t the right people if they were assholes. We all have to find our people, and I just helped you find some of yours. You were making friends at the party even without me there. Don’t sell yourself short, Art. You’re awesome.”

I lean in to kiss him, and Art smiles, but then his grin slips as he says, “You know there will be no avoiding dinner with my parents now.”

“Art, I can’t wait to have dinner with your parents. My mom is already getting the family history together. She thinks it’s adorable. Maybe we can all have dinner together, my parents and yours. I think that would be fantastic.”

Art looks surprised but delighted by the idea, and I kiss him again before sliding out of bed.

“We have to get ready,” I sigh. “Time to face the music with Frank.”

“Why would Frank play music if he wants to fire you?” Art asks.

I can’t help the burst of laughter, and I feel decidedly lighter as we get ready. Whatever happens this morning, I have Art in my life. Art tells me not to worry about Frank, and I appreciate his reassurance, but he can’t predict what will happen. It would really suck if I get fired or transferred, but I know I’ll land on my feet, especially with Art to support me.

Art is getting off a phone call when I get out of the shower, and on the way to the office he gets a text and tells me that we’re going to HR. I suppose maybe it is best to be proactive. And honestly, Frank was way out of line in how he treated Art.

It would suck to lose my job, but Art shouldn’t have to continue to work under Frank, either. The harpy obviously has a problem with him, and it only seems to be getting

worse. The more I think about it, the more I wonder if Frank was hoping I would complain about Art or ask for a transfer. I wonder if he was trying to get Art fired. He definitely doesn't seem to like Art, and I know Art has been called in before after the other techs left.

I wonder if Frank has been bullying Art all along? I should've asked Art that question, but it's a little late, since we're walking into Harry's office.

Harry is sitting behind his desk, looking cranky just like last time, but I think that's just his face. Art and I both take seats in front of Harry's desk.

A voice from the corner of the office states, "Call him in." I hadn't noticed when we walked in, but the gorgon from the party on Friday is standing against the dark bookshelves at the side of the room, wearing a black bespoke suit.

He and Art seemed to get along well, and I really hope we aren't here for some sort of complaint from him.

"I would still rather not be present," Art says.

"Alexander is right, you should be here," Harry grumbles, and the gorgon smiles at Art and leans against the shelves.

So maybe this isn't a complaint? They seem to know exactly what's going on, but I'm in the dark. I feel like the HR department is another dimension of reality. I never know quite what to expect, but I don't think now is the time to ask. Art seems to have the situation under control, although I'm definitely going to remember to ask more questions next time.

The door opens, and in walks Frank.

He does not look happy. He's got a scowl on his face and his wings are flared out behind him.

"Good. I'm glad you called me in, Harry. This situation has become untenable." Frank grabs a chair from the small table in the corner and pulls it over, leaving a good distance between himself and Art and me.

Harry just grunts. I don't think Frank has noticed the gorgon—Alexander, apparently—in the corner.

Frank starts ranting. "We have lost seven lab techs because of Art, and I'm guessing the only reason Dean here hasn't quit is because of their outside relationship. Are you aware that they're dating? And I think that's interfering with the work environment. Dean has become increasingly hostile at work."

I stare at Frank incredulously. Is he serious? I knew he was a dick, but this is absurd. I'm not hostile! I look over at Art, but he looks perfectly calm, so I try to hold on to my temper.

"In fact, I have to wonder if this doesn't fall under sexual harassment, since Art is obviously coercing Dean into a relationship." Frank leans forward, adding, "In fact, I'm fully aware that some of the employees were discussing it and believe that Art forced Dean into spending time with him outside of work."

I actually sputter at that. "Art did not... You're the one..." I start, literally at a loss for words, but Harry just holds his hand up at me, shuffling some papers around on his desk.

This seems to please Frank, who continues. "As you know, numerous complaints have been placed regarding Art. Surely at this point, disciplinary action should be taken."

Frank leans back, smiling smugly. I was worried about my job, but it's clear Frank doesn't care about me. He really doesn't like Art.

"Yes, I have those complaints here," Harry responds, shuffling through some papers. "It seems that you did indeed have seven lab technicians file complaints, three of them stating it was at your behest."

Frank sputters, but Harry holds his hand up again, continuing. "All seven transferred to other departments, where many of them unfortunately did not last long. It seems their professionalism and ability to get along with others was... problematic. In fact, two of them were accused of sexually harassing other employees along with Art, although Art didn't put their interactions in those terms."

"Well..." Frank starts, but Harry cuts him off again.

"One has to wonder about the hiring practices of lab technicians in your department, Frank."

"I'm not the problem—Art is! Those lab technicians were fine before they worked with him!" Frank bursts out.

"And yet Dean has had no complaints, and he works with Art. I believe he was actually hired when you were on vacation, though, wasn't he?" Harry says, and I almost think his craggy face is fighting off a smile.

I just lean back. Wow. This is some good shit. It looks like Frank really has been hiring shitty lab techs.

"Did you not hear me about their illicit relationship? Surely that is affecting Dean's work!" Frank hisses.

“Actually, their relationship was declared to HR when it began, and Dean’s work has been beyond stellar. He is one of our most productive lab technicians. As for the rumor that Art made Dean hang out with him, I believe that you actually demanded that Dean spend time with Art in order to...” Harry pauses, looking down at a paper, then he clears his throat and reads, “‘teach him how to interact with people in a way that doesn’t make them want to quit.’ I believe you also stated that Dean would ‘work side-by-side with Art all day, and smooth over any unpleasant interactions he may have with the rest of the staff.’ Does that sound familiar, Frank?”

Frank’s mouth is literally hanging open.

“Then there is the matter of the complaints about you, Frank,” Harry states calmly, even though Frank’s wings are getting bigger and there’s definitely a breeze in the office that wasn’t there before.

“If Art complained...” Frank starts, but Harry cuts him off yet again.

“Oh, no, I don’t mean from Art. Art is one of the few employees who doesn’t complain about you, Frank. Well, at least until he felt you put Dean into an unfair position that violated the employee handbook.”

“This is ridiculous, and I will not be subjected to this,” Frank declares, and I swear I hear thunder coming from inside the office. “Art is a pain in the ass who makes me hire new lab technicians constantly, and I cannot believe his behavior is being blamed on me. He doesn’t know how to relate to people, his social skills suck, and he’s rude, unsociable, and has no friends at work.”

“Actually, I do believe that last statement is inaccurate,” the gorgon says from the corner.

The wind stops, the low rumbling dies down, and Frank gets visibly paler.

“Mr. Kefalas. I didn’t realize you were here,” Frank stutters.

Holy shit. I didn’t realize who Alexander was, but I recognize the name Kefalas. He’s the head of the entire scientific division, and Art was chatting him up at the party on Friday like they were old friends.

“When this situation was brought to my attention, Harry was only too happy to let me know about the numerous complaints over the years about you, as well as your less than stellar hiring record. It seems there was little concrete evidence until now, but with these most recent violations, the director in your division will be conducting a thorough investigation. For now, you are placed on leave pending those results. Security is outside to escort you to your office. You are dismissed,” Alexander states.

Frank starts to mutter, but Alexander’s long hair, which looked more like dreadlocks than snakes a moment ago, starts to wave about. Frank takes notice and can’t seem to leave the room fast enough.

“Holy shit, that was epic,” I say once Frank has slammed the door. I realize that may not be the best impression to leave on the head of the scientific division, but Alexander just laughs.

“That asshole had it coming,” Harry grumbles. “I’ve dealt with petty complaints about him for years, but nothing that was a fireable offense. Demanding Dean work outside contracted hours, starting rumors about employees, and then threatening Dean’s job is the tipping point.”

“But I didn’t mind spending time with Art,” I defend.

“Of course not,” Harry agrees. “That isn’t the point. At any rate, neither of you will need to worry about Frank again. You have more important things to do in that lab than deal with bullshit.”

Art stands up. “Harry Ebershoff, it has been a pleasure as usual. I have enjoyed your logical decision making regarding the situation.”

Harry laughs, and Alexander walks to the door and opens it, motioning us out. We walk down the hallway in silence for a moment. I honestly have no idea what to say. Mr. Kefalas is legendary in the company, and he just came to help us out in HR.

We get to the elevator, and Alexander turns to Art. “Tell your parents I said hello, and I look forward to meeting them for dinner soon. Hopefully you and your partner will be there as well.”

Art smiles. “Dean and I have agreed that our mating is not just a temporary one, so I suppose partner would be an acceptable term.”

Alexander grins, congratulates us both, and walks off down the hallway as Art and I get in the elevator.

Art looks at me as we travel up to the lab, and I let out a long breath.

“Were you not satisfied with that resolution?” he asks me.

I lean into Art, wrapping my arms around him. His tentacles and arms come up and wrap around me as well. He squeezes me tightly, which is exactly what I need.

“I’m definitely satisfied. That was just... a bit of a surprise. I was worried I was going to lose my job,” I answer.

“I did tell you not to worry, Dean Miller. I do not say things I do not mean,” Art says.

I laugh, kissing him lightly as the elevator door dings open. “That is true, Art. It’s just one of the many things I love about you.”

His face softens as we leave the elevator. “Dean Miller, I love you. I do wish we did not have to work today. I would enjoy another day of cuddling you, kissing you, and having sexual relations with you.”

As we walk toward the lab, I ponder the possibility of getting Art to take the afternoon off. After all, cuddles, kissing, and sexual relations sound damn good after the morning we just had.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:15 pm

Art

It is exactly 6:00 PM. Dean Miller and I stand in front of my parents' door. Normally, I would walk in without knocking, but tonight is different.

Mom said she wouldn't treat him differently because he was a human man. That means we're doing the whole "meet the cephalopod parents" dinner, which isn't for the faint of heart.

"Most cephalopod shifters choose a mate through a matchmaking service based on compatibility. We don't date," I say.

Dean nods. "You mentioned that already."

"Yes, it's just... meeting the parents is an integral part of the process. It comes with its own rituals and practices. It may seem strange to you."

He takes my hand and squeezes it. "Decorating a tree with handmade ornaments seemed strange to you, right? And you did that for me."

When he puts it that way, I feel a lot less worried. I take a deep breath and knock on the door.

"Can I ask why you haven't gone through the matchmaking service?" Dean says.

I could bore him with the pros and cons list I make myself every year during spawning season, but those lists are never the true reason I've put it off.

“My grandma said a cephalopod shifter should not seek out a matchmaker until the ocean feels empty without their mate. The ocean has never felt empty to me.”

Dean smiles. “I love that. The ocean has never felt lonely to me either. I mean, I wasn’t looking for something serious before I found you. But now that I have...”

The door opens. Dad is wearing a traditional translucent robe that will allow his body to fully fade into the background for the ceremony. If Dean was a cephalopod shifter, I’d be wearing one too. Performing metachrosis is an important part of the rituals.

Thankfully, Dad is also wearing a pair of polka-dot boxers. “Welcome! Sorry for the unusual clothing. Anne insisted we wear all the traditional ceremonial garb. The boxers are there just in case you’re uncomfortable with nudity.” Dad smiles and shakes his head, as if he thinks it’s unlikely that Dean Miller would be uncomfortable with him being naked.

The problem with most cephalopod shifters going into finance is that it’s easy for them to work exclusively with other cephalopod shifters. Mom and Dad rarely interact with humans. Their behavior reflects this.

“Um, ok, great,” Dean Miller says.

Mom approaches the door. Luckily, she also has added a sports bra and cotton underwear underneath her translucent robe. “Please come in! The lasagna is getting cold.”

Dad beams. “I got it from a place called Don Angie. Rumor has it that the lasagna melts in your mouth.”

They both walk into the kitchen, a large portion of their bodies now visible under their robes. But Dean is unfazed. He follows them inside without any hesitation.

My parents' apartment is tastefully decorated in various shades of sage and light blue. According to research, those are the colors people find the most calming. A sleek glass table stretches out next to the kitchen where my parents have laid out a feast. In addition to Dean's lasagna, there's shrimp, crab, and steamed seaweed. My mouth waters.

"It's customary for us to use our metachrosis as we sit down to symbolize how little we know of each other at this stage," Mom says. She holds up a folded Japanese fan. "We were thinking you could use this to cover your face. You know, symbolically."

I don't know why I get teary-eyed over that. Mom has always gone the extra mile to support me. Whether it was redecorating her house to reduce my stress or buying ridiculous costumes to make me laugh, she's the kind of parent who shows her love in the most practical ways possible.

"Thank you, Mom."

She reaches for me with her tentacles first, enveloping me in a warm hug. "We love you, Garth."

"Garth?" Dean Miller asks.

"Yes, that's Art's full name," Mom explains, handing him the fan.

"Cephalopod shifters choose the name of their children from the front page of the newspaper on the day of their birth. It helps us blend in with the humans. Garth Brooks was in the paper that day."

Dean holds back a smile. "Art is named after Garth Brooks?"

"In a fashion. We think Art suits him better than Garth, don't you?" she asks.

Dean nods.

My parents both disappear, except for their underclothing. Dad's disembodied boxers and Mom's sports bra move over to the table and settle on two of the chairs.

Dean opens the fan and holds out his hand to me. "Shall we?"

I take his hand and let my body fade into the background. As always, there's a tightness and a relief that comes with being invisible. It's nice to not be seen sometimes. But the relief isn't as intense with Dean. I want him to see me.

We sit across from my parents. They become visible first. Dean and I follow suit. He folds his fan back up and sets it on the table with reverence.

"First, we begin with the family tree. We can't share a meal together as a family without checking our bloodlines." Mom picks up a folder that was waiting next to her plate and passes it across the table to Dean. He pulls an envelope out of his jacket pocket and hands it to her. It's all so formal. That makes our relationship seem far more official than it was before.

I like that. Maybe I really get to keep him.

Mom opens the envelope and scans the paper within. "Unsurprisingly, we don't have any common bloodlines that would be of concern. I don't see any genetic sequencing documents?—"

Dad slides a tentacle over her hand. "Let them sort that out if they choose to have children together. Young people these days don't always want to reproduce, and even if they did, there's no reason to think their egg donor would be related to either of them."

“But I—” she starts, then glances at me. “Do you want me to ask for his genetic sequencing documents?”

I know Mom well enough to understand how loaded that question is. I’m their only child, and I’m aware that my parents want grandchildren. They’ve never asked me if I intended to reproduce before, but when I came out to them, Mom reassured me that there were plenty of options for gay men who wanted to have children of their own. She told me she loved me too, of course, but not until after she made it clear that I could still become a dad someday.

I’ll never forget that. It was one of the rare moments when my parents revealed a hint of what they hoped for in my future, rather than just supporting what I wanted.

“I’m not sure I’d make a very good father,” I say gently. “You know that I’m awkward?—”

Dean squeezes my hand under the table. “I think you’d be a great dad. If that’s what you want.”

My parents smile at one another. They like him. I’m not exactly surprised, but it’s still a relief.

I clear my throat. “I would not like to make a decision about any future plans to reproduce at this time. Also, I do not know Dean Miller’s opinion on the matter, and I would prefer to have that conversation with him in private.”

“Very well put,” Mom says. “We appreciate it when you clearly communicate your boundaries.”

Dean Miller raises his eyebrows. “Wow. That’s... awesome. You’re awesome.”

Mom nods. “We are excellent parents. Now that we’ve established the genetic compatibility of the match, we can share a meal together.” She gestures to the tin of lasagna.

Dad dishes himself up some crab legs. Once he has a few on his plate, he drags his suckers along the shell. It’s perfectly polite to taste your food with your suckers in front of other cephalopod shifters.

Dean watches him politely, like it isn’t a big deal. “I can’t wait to try this lasagna. Thank you for thinking of me.”

“We love Art fiercely and have always planned to shower his mate with affection as well,” Dad explains matter-of-factly.

Dean smiles. “That’s... nice. I mean, I like that you clearly communicate about things. It’s refreshing. I’ve always wanted a close relationship with my in-laws too.”

Happiness blooms in my chest. Dean Miller is so kind and always seems to say the right thing. Even with my parents.

“You can see why I chose him for a mate,” I say.

Mom’s lips quirk up. “Yes, I can. We should do a toast. That’s a human thing, right? We should incorporate human customs into this dinner too, to reflect Dean’s culture.” She raises her glass of water. “To wise decision-making.”

Dad lifts his glass enthusiastically and crashes it against Mom’s. Quite literally. Both of the glasses crack. He doesn’t seem the least bit surprised.

“Edward, what are you doing?” she asks.

“I was doing a toast.”

“You’re not supposed to break the glasses.”

He glances down at where his glass is leaking water onto the table. “I didn’t know that. I thought that was the idea. It always seemed a little dangerous to me.”

Dean throws back his head and laughs.

I was worried about him meeting my parents, but I shouldn’t have been. Dean always seems to understand me. Of course he would be the same with my family.

Dean

Christmas is always a little bittersweet, because I love the holiday so much, and I kind of hate to see it end. This year, though, I have so much to look forward to. I wake up to Christmas snuggles from Art, which quickly leads to Christmas morning sex, and I have zero complaint about that.

Over a lazy breakfast, we open our gifts. Art wanted definite parameters for gift giving, so we agreed on two gifts—one less expensive item and one more extravagant item. In true Art fashion, monetary ranges were also included. It actually made the process of choosing gifts less stressful, because I knew I wasn't going overboard or not buying enough. We both make good money at the lab, and we agreed it would be fun to treat each other to something special.

We take turns, and he opens my smaller gift first. It's the hand-blown glass ornament he was admiring at the craft fair.

"Dean Miller, you remembered!" He holds the ornament reverently, twisting and turning it around to see all the colors within its shape. "I shall cherish it all year, because it reminds me of the ocean."

He is smiling broadly as he hands me my gift, which is in a huge bag. I kind of wonder if it's some kind of gift basket. Art is cradling his ornament and watching me excitedly.

I peel back the bag to see a beautiful green plant inside. It's in a beige pot, and I gingerly lift it out. The leaves are deep green, round, and have a lighter green fleck

slightly off center. Some of them look like they're almost curled in a tiny bit, and I'm kind of reminded of Art's suckers.

"Art! It's beautiful! What kind of plant is it?" I ask. I love that Art got me a plant after I admired his, and I'm sure the plant has some kind of meaning.

"It is a *pilea peperomioides*, also known as a Chinese money plant. Superstition says that it brings the owner good luck and wealth, but more importantly, it is excellent at air purification and humidity regulation. Plants are also shown to reduce stress, and the *pilea peperomioides* is also non-toxic and relatively low maintenance, although I will be happy to help you take care of the plant." Art smiles as he says the last part.

"I love it! And I love the superstition behind it too—I like that sort of thing, and I'm happy you got me a money plant," I add.

"The name most likely comes from the fact that the leaves look like coins, and it does actually propagate quite easily. Small plants called 'pups' grow in the soil around the parent plant, and they can be replanted. So in giving you one plant, I have given you many plants," Art adds, gently resting a tentacle against my thigh.

I lean in and kiss him. I love that he shared something he loved with me, and it's kind of cool that I can have a bunch of baby money plants in my apartment.

"Now for the big gifts! You have to open mine," I say, super excited. "Although it really benefits both of us," I add.

Art cradles the ornament in one tentacle and takes the gift bag I give him. "Dean, this was supposed to be an extravagant gift. This is a very small gift bag."

"Hey, size isn't what counts," I laugh, and I swear Art even rolls his eyes at that comment, which only makes me laugh harder. He opens the bag and gasps when he

sees the plane tickets and the hotel reservation form.

“We said we’d take a trip in January, so here it is! I can’t wait to go away with you and enjoy warm weather and the ocean,” I gush. I cleared the date with Art’s parents and work—we’ll only take off the Friday for a long weekend, so we won’t miss much work.

Art is speechless, and he leans over and wraps me up in his tentacles and arms, kissing me. When we finally come up for air, I’m grinning from ear to ear. Seeing Art’s reaction is awesome, and I’m so glad he likes my gifts.

“Your turn, Dean Miller,” Art insists, getting up to grab a huge wrapped box to place in front of me.

I wiggle my eyebrows at him. “Maybe size does matter—you certainly never fall short in that department.”

He laughs and wraps a tentacle around my neck. If we didn’t have to get ready to go to my parents for Christmas day, I’d be ready for round two with Art, but that will have to wait until later tonight.

I unwrap the box, and inside is a state of the art breadmaker I’d actually been eyeing in the store the other day. It is an extravagant gift, and I never would have spent that much on myself. I turn to Art and smile. “You saw me admiring this! Art, I love it! I’m so excited! It has all these settings for artisan bread and adding mixtures into dough...” I trail off as I pull it out of the box and start flipping through the manual.

“Yes, this is a ‘fun’ gift, so I will not mention the health risks of high carbohydrate consumption in humans. Also, store bought bread has unhealthy preservatives, so this would be a healthier choice than that, and you do enjoy bringing sandwiches for lunch.”

I can't help the grin on my face. I launch myself at Art, hugging him. "I love it, and I love that you chose gifts that will keep me healthy, too."

"I care about your well-being as my mate, so of course I would think of your health. Your gifts also please me greatly. The beauty of the ornament will reduce my stress levels, and the vacation will be beneficial for our mental and physical well-being. I am very excited to go away with you, Dean," Art says, and we end up cuddling and making out before we need to get ready to go to my parents' house.

Christmas at my parents' house will be amazing this year. My family is coming, and not only did my mom invite Art, but she also invited Art's parents and cousin, Lisa, since her parents are away for the holidays.

We're the first to get there, and Art insists on ringing the doorbell, even though I would've just walked in. I remember the formality of meeting the parents for cephalopods, so we stand patiently on the front stoop until my mom opens the door.

"Merry Christmas!" she shouts, and then she drags me into a hug.

The minute she lets me go, she pulls Art into a hug. He looks slightly panicked, and I can tell his tentacles have no idea what to do. This is definitely not the formality he's used to with meeting parents.

"Dean! Art!" my dad yells from the other room, and then my mom is pulling us into the house, and my dad is taking a turn at hugging us.

"Mom, Dad—this is Art. Art, these are my parents," I say once my dad has let us go.

"Uh, Merry Christmas," Art responds. "How shall I address you?"

"Oh, Mom and Dad work just fine," my mom says, and she either doesn't notice

Art's appalled look or she simply chooses to ignore it.

I'm betting on the latter. My mom is determined to make everyone love her, and she's usually successful.

She loops an arm through one of Art's tentacles and walks him toward the kitchen, asking questions about seafood, since she knows that's what Art likes. When Art starts discussing the health benefits of wild-caught versus farm-raised, she nods along and makes interested noises, occasionally asking questions.

"They'll be best friends in a matter of hours," my dad comments, throwing an arm over my shoulder.

I laugh. "More like a matter of minutes."

The doorbell rings again, and the process of hugs and holiday greetings starts all over again and continues in quick succession as everyone arrives. I think Art must have texted his parents and his cousin about the hugs, because when his parents arrive they jump right into hugging everyone, and they're only slightly awkward.

Lisa, on the other hand, firmly puts out her hand for a handshake before anyone can hug her. It almost flusters my mother, but she recovers. Once she finds out Lisa travels and plays chess, they end up chatting about different countries and cultures.

I think my mother even wins over Lisa, and I wouldn't be totally shocked if she gets a hug at the end of the night. (Only slightly shocked.)

The food is ready after everyone arrives, and we all sit down to a Christmas feast. We gorge ourselves on our traditional Christmas food—turkey, ham, mashed potatoes, stuffing, corn, green beans, candied sweet potatoes—but there's also a selection of seafood for Art's family, and everyone eats until they're groaning. We drink hot

apple cider and mulled wine and eggnog, and Art's family even takes part in the fun little secret Santa gift exchange my family does.

For the gift exchange we choose numbers and then can take gifts from other people, and it actually gets quite cutthroat. Lisa's competitive nature comes into play, and I can tell she enjoys the entire thing. There's a monetary limit on the gift exchange, and for his secret Santa Art brought a different type of plant from the one he gave me. It's actually one of the most fought over gifts, with everyone stealing it from everyone else until eventually my Uncle Owen ends up with it, smiling and laughing.

Art and I snuggle up on the couch, watching the holiday chaos after the gift exchange is over. My father is setting out desserts while having an intense discussion with Art's mom. They seem to be talking about stocks and retirement plans, and they both look totally enthusiastic.

Art's dad is questioning my mom about the fruit cake. "But if it's hard as a rock and disgusting, why do you buy it for dessert?"

My mom laughs and tries to explain the tradition of fruit cake, but Art's dad does not look convinced.

Lisa is sitting at a table with Uncle Owen playing a game of checkers. They're both glaring at each other between moves, and Uncle Owen occasionally takes a sip of whiskey before glaring again.

"Should we go and intervene with your uncle? Lisa has been known to make her opponents cry," Art murmurs to me.

I just chuckle. "Uncle Owen is up to the challenge. He was a drill sergeant."

Lisa beats him, and Uncle Owen downs his whiskey before telling her, "You are a

formidable opponent with a strategic mind. I like that.”

They end up talking about other strategic games while we all get up to grab dessert. My mom even added crab rangoon to the desserts this year, thinking Art’s family might like it. Sure enough, it’s one of the first desserts to go.

While Art is talking to my mom, my dad sidles up next to me. He puts his arm around my shoulder. “We’re so happy for you, Dean. Art is wonderful, and so is his family. His mother and I had such a good chat. His cousin is a little intense, but we’ve got Uncle Owen, so we can’t complain,” he chuckles.

I chuckle along with him, looking at Uncle Owen and Lisa debating whether Chinese checkers or backgammon requires more skill.

“We’ll have to do a dinner with just us soon. We definitely want to get to know your partner better.” My dad smiles as he says it, and I’m so glad that my parents have always supported me.

I put my arm around him, giving him a hug. “Thanks, Dad.”

As we look out over the Christmas chaos of the two families gathered together, I’m so thankful that Art is part of my life. I’ve always loved Christmas, but having him to share the holiday with has made it that much more wonderful.

Art

I kind of get it. When Dean is sitting in his parents' crowded living room, our families crammed into the tiny space, his face alight with happiness, the magic of Christmas makes sense to me. It still isn't my holiday, and I'd never celebrate it without him, but it's nice when Dean is around.

After all the cookies have been eaten, and it's time to go back home, Dean and I cuddle on his couch. The silence and the warmth of his body feel good after such a busy day. He rubs his hand along my back and kisses the top of my head. I feel loved. It's such an intense sensation, I don't know what to do with all the emotion in my chest.

"I would like to fuck you with my tentacles, Dean Miller."

He laughs. "Would you, now?"

"Yes. Forcefully."

He wraps his arms around me and squeezes me tight. "Good. I want that too. Should we go to your apartment to do it in the tub or stay here?"

I have to think about that for a minute. Underwater sex is inherently better, but I'm feeling too lazy to go to my apartment. "Here."

He considers me for a moment. "How would you feel about humoring a silly fantasy of mine?"

“What kind of fantasy?”

He shrugs. “I’ve always wanted to have sex in front of the Christmas tree. It seems cozy.”

“The things I want to do to you right now are not cozy,” I warn him.

He laughs again. “Okay. But could we still do it in front of the Christmas tree? I’ll lay out a blanket.”

I nod. “If you would like to have sex in front of a houseplant, then I can agree to that. It certainly isn’t any stranger than the things I’ve asked to do with you.”

He holds back a smile. That facial expression is familiar to me now. He does it when I amuse him, but he doesn’t want to show it. There’s a warmth to the way he schools his features, as if he finds the whole process endearing.

People have teased me and even tried to fire me because of how awkward I am, but Dean seems to enjoy it. That makes me feel safe with him.

“Please get on your hands and knees with your pants off,” I say.

Heat burns in his eyes. “Okay. I can do that.”

He lays down a blanket in front of the tree, just like he promised. Then he stares into my eyes as he takes off his clothing, piece by piece. He takes off his sweater and socks too, until he’s standing completely naked in front of the tree. Only the twinkling lights strung around its branches illuminate the room, leaving the right side of his body in shadow. He looks like a planet only partially lit up by the sun. He’s as beautiful as a planet, too, with the same majesty and mystery. I can barely breathe while looking at him like that.

I've never believed in god or fate. Most cephalopods don't. But here in this moment, I wonder if Dean is the reason why the ocean never felt lonely to me. If it had, I would've contacted the matchmaker and ended up in a relationship with someone else.

I still don't believe in fate, but I want to. Just for tonight.

He lowers himself onto his knees, then reaches forward and presses his hands onto the blanket. The curve of his ass in the dim light is so lovely that I can do nothing but stare for a moment. The light pink marks from my suckers dot his skin, and I don't think I'll ever get over how wonderful that is.

I kneel down next to him and run my fingers along the curve of his ass. "This shape deserves its own name."

"You mean a half circle? An arch? A half-moon?" he teases.

"No. Something unique to your ass."

His lips quirk up on one side. "Is that right? How about now?" He lowers his chest, until only his ass is sticking up in the air. The new position highlights the contrast between the soft globes of his ass cheeks and the firmness of his thighs.

"That shape also deserves its own name," I say.

He laughs.

"I feel like a scientist who has found a brand new plant no one has ever seen before," I tell him.

"I hate to break it to you, but other people have seen my ass before."

I press my lips together, not sure how to express what I'm feeling. "I... don't think they have. Not like me, I mean. I appreciate your ass more than they did."

This time he doesn't laugh. He smiles at me and reaches back to grasp one of my tentacles. "I think that's true."

"It isn't in a cephalopod's nature to fall in love more than once." It's a scary thing to admit out loud. Of course, he must know that already, with my parents being so intense and the way our mating rituals work. But it still must be said. He has to know how vulnerable I am with him now.

"It's okay, Art. Your heart is safe with me."

The softness of his voice and the way his body is positioned make it easy to believe him. He's prostrating himself before me—letting me have him in the most intimate of ways. But it isn't just this moment that makes me believe him. It's the way he introduced me to his parents and how eagerly he's shared his favorite holiday with me. Dean is a generous and kind person. I think he's telling me the truth.

I run my tentacles along his back, gently at first. He closes his eyes, his body relaxing. I drag my suckers along his skin, letting them taste and latch onto him. He takes in a sharp breath.

"Do you know how cephalopods breed their mates?" I ask.

He smiles. "You could show me."

"It's kind of messy. It's not an everyday thing. It might be overwhelming for you."

He opens his eyes. "Art, I want to be overwhelmed by you."

"If it becomes too much, you can tell me. I will withdraw," I assure him.

“I know, babe. I trust you.”

The endearment takes me off guard. It feels like a claiming of sorts. Not an “I love you” or the official start of a relationship, but the beginning of something else—something deeper.

I move in closer, until I’m directly behind Dean. He widens his knees until I can see the most intimate part of him. His puckered skin and lightly dusted hair is mesmerizing. I place my hands on his ass cheeks and ease them apart to see him better. “I enjoy looking at you.”

“Yeah? Do you enjoy being fully clothed while I’m lying here naked?”

I hear the jest in his voice. He’s telling a joke. But I do enjoy it.

“Yes. It is exciting to me. It makes me want to ravage you.”

He shudders. The involuntary movement is as sexy as his naked body. There’s something primal about it.

“That’s hot,” he says. “You could hold me down, you know. With your tentacles. To ravage me.”

“Is that a request, Dean Miller?”

He nods.

“And you will not think less of me if I give in to my... baser instincts? Because if I am breeding you, it will be harder for me to hold back.”

He lets out a shaky breath. “Good.”

I wrap a tentacle around each of his wrists to keep them in place. It's a heady feeling to see him so powerless underneath me. It's emotional too. Giving himself over to me is such an intimate act. It makes me feel incredibly close to him.

I wrap two tentacles around his ankles and splay one across his back to keep him down.

"You are mine," I whisper.

"Yes. I'm yours."

I slide a tentacle up and down his crease, smearing plenty of lubricant in my wake. His body is pliant and relaxed as I ease inside him. His surrender is complete in every way. Penetrating him like this is a kind of claim that I feel deep in my soul.

I take my time opening him up, first with the thinnest part of one tentacle, then coiling it deeper inside him, the way I've done before. He does nothing but lie there and whimper. I'm so attuned to his body that each sound from his mouth is like a loud exclamation. I withdraw the first tentacle and ease in with the second, spreading around more lubricant. When I enter him with both at the same time he lets out a soft moan.

Dean likes to take me deep. I plunge as deep as I dare to go. His fingers scrabble at the rug underneath us, and I worry I may have gone too far.

"Is it too much?" I ask.

He shakes his head. He opens his mouth silently, and it feels like a request. My tentacles respond before I can even register it by bringing his wrists together. One of them holds him down, while the other enters his mouth. It forces itself all the way to his throat, almost choking him. I close my eyes as I savor the flavor of his mouth, his skin, and the deepest part of his body.

“You taste so good,” I say. “Like... home.”

I fuck him in earnest now, sucking on the skin of his wrists and ankles with a pressure I know will leave marks. I need to claim his skin, too. I slip the thinnest part of a third tentacle into his ass, and he tenses for just a moment. I almost ask if he wants me to stop, but he relaxes and pushes his hips back, his desire clear. He tenses again when I circle my last tentacle around his cock and tease his slit with my tip.

“Is that too much?” I ask.

He shakes his head again.

I have all of my tentacles inside him now, except for the ones holding him down. It’s euphoric to use every one of them to claim him. I rut my cock against his right ass cheek, and the delicious friction is wonderful.

“I’m going to breed you. Fill you up with my seed.” I love the way his body trembles at my words. It’s like my voice is another tentacle easing inside him. My body crests, and this time, I allow the bliss to surge through my tentacles, until they’re all thick with my release. Dean cries out as the tentacles inside him expand and dump my seed into him—his mouth, his slit, his ass. The ones in his ass expand again and again, pouring my essence into his gut. He claws at the ground, his knuckles turning white.

My release oozes over the floor where my tentacles were holding down his wrists and ankles. It’s everywhere. My dick spurts over his back, and I can’t help but cry out too. I’ve never experienced anything like it. My dad warned me that mating with someone was special—that it would make my heart yearn for them forever.

I collapse on top of him, desperate to be even closer. “I love you, Dean. I love you so much.”

The tentacle inside his mouth retreats because my heart needs to hear those words

from him too. He gasps for a moment, then presses a kiss to the tentacle in question. “I love you too,” he rasps out. “God, that was amazing.”

I slowly withdraw from his ass. My release gushes out, pooling underneath us. I hold him tightly with all my tentacles and close my eyes. The lights of the Christmas tree still flicker beside us, our Christmas gifts to one another tucked underneath. This is the perfect ending to a perfect day.

“I guess Christmas will be our anniversary,” I say. “Now that we’re officially mates.”

He smiles. “I love that.”

I do too. The whole world will celebrate with us every year.

THE END