



Snowed in: With the Alien Tentacle Monster

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Category: Romance, M-m Romance, Science Fiction

Description: This Christmas, love comes with tentacles.

Logan's perfect Christmas plan? Isolation in his remote cabin, far from holiday memories that cut too deep. But fate—and a crashed spaceship—have something else in store.

Enter Valen: a gorgeous alien prince with glowing skin, very versatile tentacles, and an overpowering need to make Logan his mate. Permanently.

Trapped together in a snowbound cabin, their scorching attraction melts away cultural barriers—and Logan's carefully constructed walls. But as much as Logan yearns to give in to this new connection, he has to wonder what will happen when Valen's family arrives to claim him back.

Total Pages (Source): 38

CHAPTER 1

Snow crunched under Logan's boots as he trudged through the darkened forest. His breath formed clouds in the frigid December air. The cabin's warm lights beckoned through the trees, but he wasn't ready to head back. Not yet. Out here, surrounded by old pines and pristine snow drifts, he could almost forget himself.

His phone buzzed in his pocket. Another text from his sister. He didn't need to look to know what it said. The same concerned messages had flooded in since he'd announced his plans for a solitary Christmas.

He was fine, though. Completely fine.

Except, of course, that he wasn't.

Five years had passed since Jeff's accident, yet December still felt like an open wound. The cheerful decorations, the carols, the well-meaning invitations to family gatherings... it all scraped against raw edges he couldn't seem to heal.

A flash of light caught his attention. Logan tilted his head back, watching a bright streak arc across the star-filled sky. A shooting star. He hadn't made a wish since... since before. But something about the silence and the solitude loosened the tight band around his chest.

"I wish..." His voice cracked. "I wish it would stop hurting."

The light grew larger, brighter. Logan's eyes widened as he realized it wasn't fading

like a normal shooting star. Instead, it seemed to be heading directly toward the forest. The streak turned into a fireball, casting an eerie blue glow across the snow. A high-pitched whine filled the air, making his teeth ache.

"What the hell?"

The object crashed through the treetops with a thunderous crack, sending a shower of broken branches and snow in all directions. Logan stumbled backward as the ground shook. The impact echoed through the valley, followed by an unnatural silence.

Where there should have been a smoking crater, a metallic shape gleamed in the moonlight.

What was that?

Logan went to investigate.

His pulse raced as he approached the object. It wasn't a meteor or an asteroid. No, it was definitely too smooth for that. It looked more like an egg or a teardrop, with a shiny, chrome exterior. It was about the size of a sedan and nestled between two trees, half buried in the snow.

He reached out a gloved hand and touched it. Cold, but not freezing. The metal vibrated softly, like a purring cat. Logan frowned. What was this thing?

He circled the object. There didn't seem to be any way to open it. Maybe it was some kind of experimental aircraft? But who would test something like that in the middle of the forest? And where was the pilot?

He stepped back, trying to get a better look at the strange thing.

Still, he had no clue what it could be.

He pulled his phone from his pocket and snapped several photos, but the flash only created a blinding reflection off the smooth surface.

"Damn." He tried again without flash, but the darkness made the photos too grainy to make out any details.

Fuck this.

His toes had gone numb inside his boots, and he needed better light for this.

He tucked his phone away and took one last walk around the object. Still no seams, no markings, nothing to indicate its origin or purpose. Just smooth, perfect metal nestled in disturbed snow.

Nothing he could do about it for now. He'd return when the sun was up and get a better look. Maybe by then his mind would make sense of what he'd witnessed.

Logan marked the location on his phone and started the trek back, leaving deep footprints in the snow. The object's soft humming faded behind him, replaced by the familiar sounds of the winter forest at night.

Valen's consciousness stirred, awareness spreading through his nebulous form like ripples in water. His being, a swirling mass of azure energy, pulsed with growing urgency. The pod had stopped moving. His mate was near. He needed to find him. It was all he could focus on.

Heat. Need. Mate.

With a soft hiss, the pod's seal broke. Cool air rushed in, carrying unfamiliar scents

and, more importantly, the sense of someone nearby. His formless body rippled with anticipation.

He emerged from the pod, his energy coalescing and shifting as he moved, trying to find the right shape. The world outside was white and cold, so different from anything he'd known before. But none of that mattered. Where was his mate?

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"Where are you?" he called out inside his mind. "I'm here. I've come for you."

This was not how it was supposed to go. His mate was supposed to be right there at his destination so he wouldn't have to bear this desperation for long.

Something had gone wrong.

Valen was smart enough to realize that much.

But the urge to mate clouded his mind and made it impossible to figure out exactly what had gone wrong.

He spotted something that looked like a habitat, bright and inviting. Was this where his mate was?

It had to be.

Logan's cabin was warm, a stark contrast to the frozen landscape outside. He shuffled into the kitchen, movements mechanical as he filled the copper kettle and set it on the stove. His fingers, still cold from the forest expedition, fumbled with the tea canister.

The strange metallic object from the woods lingered in his mind.

What the hell could it be?

Steam began to rise from the kettle. Logan grabbed a mug, but just as he was about to pour the hot water, a movement outside the kitchen window caught his eye.

Something bright was moving toward the cabin.

Logan froze.

The kettle whistled, shrill and sudden. He grabbed it reflexively, turning down the heat. Through the window, the odd shape of light was getting closer.

Whatwasthat?

Logan set down the kettle and went toward the door. Should he grab his firearm? No, this might just be kids playing a prank on him.

He looked out the window once more, but couldn't see the thing anymore. Still, he had to investigate. He had to know what that was.

And when he opened the door, he came face to face with it.

Logan had no words to describe what he saw; it seemed as if the northern lights themselves had descended from the heavens and coalesced into a ball of swirling energy to greet him at the door.

Then something extraordinary happened; the mysterious thing began to change, taking on a more definite shape. A torso emerged, followed by a head with striking topaz eyes. Where arms and legs should be, six primary tentacles formed instead, four on the bottom and two on his torso, blue with pink suckers. Smaller tentacles emerged from its shoulders and back.

Logan's breath caught in his throat. His body tensed, caught between the instinct to flee and stunned awe.

Holy shit. There was an actual tentacle monster on his doorstep.

Maybe this was it. Maybe he'd finally cracked.

A hysterical laugh bubbled up in his throat as an odd realization struck him. This thing, whatever it was, looked exactly like the monster he'd read about in an erotic story three weeks ago. And what that monster had done with those tentacles...

Nope. Not thinking about that right now.

"I..." His voice failed him. The being's skin glowed bright, its tentacles reaching out to him.

Logan should run. He should definitely run. But he found himself rooted to the spot.

The first touch against his cheek wasn't gentle. It was hungry, searching, urgent. The moment the tentacle made contact, Logan's mind flooded with foreign sensations as if he could feel exactly what the alien felt: Need. Want. Mine. Mate. The intensity of it made his knees weak.

This was a monster, and by all rights, Logan should be scared shitless.

Instead, he was overwhelmed.

There was so much longing in that touch it was difficult to process anything else.

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And his body responded to those alien desires as if they were his own.

More tentacles reached for him. Each new point of contact intensifying the rush of need that suddenly suffused Logan. Mate. Found you. Need you. The being's thoughts weren't words exactly, but raw, unfiltered emotions that bypassed all rational thought.

The creature moved closer. Its topaz eyes had darkened, pupils dilated to black pools as his appendages wrapped around Logan's waist, his arms, sending pulses of desperate yearning through his skin.

Logan swallowed an instinctive moan.

God, how long had it been since anyone had touched him with longing?

He must be losing it.

All those nights alone since Jeff's death, all that isolation, it had finally driven him insane, just like his sister had warned him it would.

Because there was no way this was real. He was hallucinating, and his hallucination was touching him, and God...

He was so fucking horny.

"Wait," Logan gasped, but his hands betrayed him, reaching out to touch the being's azure skin. The monster trilled in response, its tentacles tightening possessively. More waves of emotion flooded through the contact: Mine. Please. Want.

"This is crazy," Logan whispered, even as another tentacle slid up his back, drawing an involuntary shudder from him. "I've completely lost my mind."

The monster's response was immediate—a surge of possessive desire so strong it made Logan's knees buckle. Only the tentacles wrapped around him kept him upright, supporting him as the being drew him closer.

Fuck it, Logan decided. If this was madness, he didn't want to be sane anymore.

He leaned into the being's embrace, letting his own hands explore those strange appendages. They were smooth and warm under his fingertips, almost silky to the touch. As he stroked them, the being made a sound like purring, low and pleased. The tip of the tentacle curled around Logan's wrist, urging his hand higher until it rested against the being's cheek. Logan ran his thumb over the monster's bottom lip, marveling at the softness.

A shiver went down his spine as more emotions poured through the monster's touch. Longing. Hunger. Desire.

Logan swallowed hard. This thing wanted him so badly. "What... who are you?"

The being tilted its head, studying him. Then the image of a word formed in his mind: Valen.

"Valen," Logan repeated. "You... you have a name?"

Another wave of emotion rolled over him—affirmation mixed with amusement. The tentacle around his waist tightened.

Logan laughed breathlessly. Of course the tentacle monster had a name. Why not? "Nice to meet you, then. I'm Logan."

The monster's - no, Valen's - mouth curved into a smile, revealing sharp fangs that sent an unexpected thrill of fear and arousal through Logan's gut.

He was definitely losing his mind.

It felt good, though. Valen's tentacles were still caressing him, sending sparks of pleasure across his skin. And when Valen bent to brush his lips over Logan's, Logan's thoughts were too clouded with lust to do anything but respond. Valen's tongue was warm and sweet and insistent; it felt almost human as he explored Logan's mouth with increasing fervor.

Logan moaned against the monster's lips as his cock began to strain against his jeans. Fuck. He hadn't been this turned on in years. He'd forgotten what desire felt like, the heat pooling in his belly, the needy pressure building inside him...

Yesss.

Was that Valen's thought or his?

Logan wasn't sure as he felt himself lifted off his feet. Tentacles wrapped around his legs and arms, holding him securely as Valen carried him deeper inside the cabin. His pulse raced in anticipation. What was happening? Was he going to be fucked like the men in the stories he read about?

As if in response to the thought, Valen purred again. Logan felt the vibration of it against his chest as he was lowered onto his own bed. He watched, breathless, as Valen crawled over him.

"Are you... are we going to...?" Logan asked.

Valen's tentacles slid under Logan's shirt, touching bare skin, and a flood of need,

raw, intense and unmistakable gave Logan all the answers he needed.

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Mine, mine, mine. Need to have, to claim.

Logan groaned as those feelings washed over him. He arched up into the touch, unable to stop himself as Valen's tentacles continued to explore his chest and proceeded to tear the fabric of his shirt apart.

"Hey!" Logan complained. "That was one of my?—"

His words were cut off by another hungry kiss. Valen's tongue invaded his mouth, tasting and exploring, while more tentacles found their way into Logan's pants.

When one of them brushed against his straining erection, Logan gasped, hips jerking instinctively. Above him, Valen rumbled with what felt like satisfaction at finding such a sensitive spot. He stroked Logan's cock again, harder this time, and Logan moaned into his mouth.

Fuck. This was really happening. He was about to be fucked by a tentacle monster.

And he was going to love it.

The rest of Logan's clothes met the same fate as his shirt until he was naked and writhing underneath Valen's touch. The cool air did nothing to quell his arousal; if anything, it heightened everything. Every stroke of Valen's tentacles against his skin sent shivers of sharp lust racing through his body. His own or Valen's, he couldn't tell anymore.

One of Valen's appendages had wrapped around every one of his limbs, keeping him

from moving while Valen explored his body, learning every sensitive spot with single-minded intensity. Two smaller tentacles had taken up positions on his nipples, suckers teasing them relentlessly. The sensation went straight to Logan's cock, which twitched and ached between their bodies.

Logan pulled at the tentacles that held his wrists. They didn't give, didn't allow him to touch himself, but this only made Logan ache all the more.

Another tentacle was exploring along the crease of his inner thigh, brushing dangerously close to his balls while a fourth explored his rim, pressing lightly against his hole in a way that made Logan squirm.

Through their touch-connection, he felt Valen's delight at his reactions. Yes. Entrance. Here. Claim.

"Wait," Logan gasped. As much as he wanted this, as much as he needed this... "Not... not dry."

The monster paused, tilting its head in puzzlement.

"We need... we need something to ease the way..." Logan explained, trying to ignore the screaming emptiness inside him, the way the tentacle against his rim made his whole body throb with need.

Suddenly, though, that tentacle became slick. Logan blinked. How had it done that? But Valen allowed him no room for thought, rubbing slow circles over Logan's entrance before pushing inside.

Logan cried out as the tip of Valen's appendage breached him, stretching him open inch by inch. It wasn't one of the bigger ones, but it was thick enough to make Logan moan and arch up off the bed—as much as Valen's hold on him allowed.

Logan's eyes closed as he rode that first wave of sensation, and the next thing he knew, something pressed against his lips. He opened his mouth without thinking, sucking at the tentacle. Thick fluid spilled across his tongue. It tasted sweet. Almost like honey. He swallowed instinctively, and immediately felt warmth flood his system. It radiated out from his belly, relaxing him while heightening every sensation. The feeling only intensified as the slick tentacle began thrusting slowly in and out of Logan's ass, suckers rubbing deliciously against his inner walls.

It was fucking perfect.

Logan's eyelids fluttered as he sucked harder on Valen's tentacle, swallowing more of his sweet fluid and relishing the feeling of being fucked open by another appendage. Valen purred in satisfaction, pumping his tentacle into Logan's mouth with a slow rhythm that mimicked the movement of the tentacle in his ass.

The combination of stimulation was almost too much. Logan writhed helplessly under Valen, his moans muffled by the appendage in his mouth. He could feel himself leaking precome against his stomach. Every nerve sang. Every thrust pushed him closer to the edge.

He wanted to say something, to ask Valen to stop or keep going, but all he could do was suck desperately at the tentacle between his lips and hope Valen knew what he needed.

Valen responded with a rush of reassurance. Yes. Soon. Mine.

The tentacle in Logan's ass withdrew suddenly and Logan groaned at its loss - until two larger appendages spread him wider, lining themselves up at his entrance.

Ohfuck. They were both thicker than the first one, and they were pressing into Logan together, stretching him wide. Logan's eyes rolled back in his head as he struggled

against Valen's restraints, trying and failing to push himself onto the twin tentacles invading him. The pressure was incredible. The stretch bordered on pain, but the honeyed liquid still flowing into his mouth kept his muscles relaxed enough for Valen to continue opening him up.

Slowly, agonizingly slowly, the two appendages sank deeper until Logan felt their tapered tips nudge against his prostate.

He nearly screamed at the sensation, bucking his hips and clenching down hard around Valen's tentacles as they pressed into his most sensitive spots. His own cock jumped, leaking more precome into the hollow of his stomach. Logan was distantly aware that he was whimpering and moaning like some sort of wild animal, drooling around the tentacle in his mouth, but the sensations flooding through him were unlike anything he'd ever experienced. Valen's pleasure mingled with his, amplifying each touch until all he could do was ride the overwhelming sensations and let Valen take him apart.

He'd never been so perfectly owned in his life.

Valen's tentacles began to pulse, massaging his inner walls as they worked deeper inside him. Logan shuddered as he realized they were growing even thicker. He moaned helplessly, feeling his body stretch impossibly further. He was so fucking full. He couldn't think anymore. He could barely breathe.

More honeyed liquid dulled his pain until only pleasure remained, a deep pulsing need as those thick tentacles filled him again and again.

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Logan's vision blurred. He was close, so close...

Another firm tentacle wrapped itself around his cock as Valen continued to fuck him. It stroked once from base to tip, and Logan lost it completely. His orgasm ripped through him like a storm, sending shockwaves of pleasure crashing through him. His body convulsed, clenching around Valen's tentacles, milking them as he rode out his release.

Valen shot his own sweet load deep inside, coating Logan's insides in hot fluid. Logan groaned as the tentacle monster's seed flooded his body, triggering another smaller wave of bliss. His limbs trembled uncontrollably. His mind reeled. Everything seemed fuzzy and distant except for the feeling of Valen claiming him, owning him utterly as they both shuddered together.

Mine, mate, yes, perfect.

Logan's eyes fluttered shut. Exhaustion swept over him in a warm tide, pulling him under until he slipped into unconsciousness surrounded by Valen's embrace.

CHAPTER 2

Sunlight filtered through strange transparent barriers, casting unfamiliar patterns across Valen's azure skin. He hovered near the sleeping form of his mate, his tentacles instinctively reaching out before he caught himself and pulled back.

Stars above, what had he done?

The previous night's memories flooded his mind. The crash landing. The overwhelming mating heat. Finding Logan and... claiming him without proper courtship, without explanations, without permission.

This was not how a prince of the Nexa was supposed to behave. He'd been traveling to the Andromeda system to participate in a carefully arranged mating ceremony with a noble from the Crystalline Empire. Instead, his pod had malfunctioned, drawn off course by some failing of the system.

Valen's smaller tentacles twisted with anxiety as he observed the primitive dwelling. Wooden walls. Cloth coverings. Crude metal implements. This wasn't even a space-faring civilization. How could he explain to his family that he'd claimed a mate from an underdeveloped world?

Logan stirred in his sleep, and the sight of him tugged at all of Valen's three hearts. The mating bond thrummed between them, already strong despite its hasty formation. Through it, he could sense Logan's contentment, his peaceful dreams.

At least until he woke up and realized this wasn't some strange dream.

How would Valen explain? He'd picked up some of Logan's language during their... coupling... but not nearly enough to explain the complexity of their situation.

How could he tell this beautiful, unsuspecting creature what had really happened last night? That he was now bound to an alien prince?

A soft groan drew Valen's attention. Logan's eyelids fluttered, consciousness seeping back slowly. Valen held perfectly still, not wanting to spook his mate.

For a moment as he woke, Logan just stared at the ceiling, and Valen could sense the fog of sleep lifting through their newfound connection. Then Logan turned his head.

The peaceful morning spell shattered.

Logan jerked upright, pulling the blanket with him. His eyes went wide, mouth opening in a silent gasp as he took in Valen's form in the daylight.

Did it not please him?

How strange.

It was instinct for Valen to assume the form his mate desired during their mating session. He reached out, one tentacle extending toward Logan's bare shoulder. Don't fear, he tried to project through their connection. I would never harm you.

Logan flinched back, his breathing quick and shallow. "You... you're really..." His voice trailed off as he stared at Valen's tentacles. "You're really not human."

"Not human," Valen mouthed, trying to sound out the words. They felt strange, but Logan nodded.

Did Logan want him to be human, then?

Through their mental connection, Valen reached out, trying to understand what form would please his mate. Images flickered through Logan's mind, memories of desire, of passion, of love. Valen latched onto them, letting his form collapse back into pure energy so he could shift.

His fluid, hazy body solidified into muscle and bone, taking shape according to Logan's deepest longings. Dark hair sprouted from his head, falling just so across his forehead. Full lips. Strong jaw. Gentle eyes that crinkled at the corners when?—

A choked sound escaped Logan's throat. All color drained from his face as he

scrambled backward, nearly falling off the bed. "No," he whispered, voice raw. "God, no. Don't... Don't do that."

Valen froze, confusion rippling through him. Had he not perfectly recreated the form he'd found in Logan's memories? The one that sparked such powerful emotions?

The emotions he sensed in Logan now were powerful as well, but not positive. He caught fragments of anguish so intense it made his hearts stutter. Loss. Grief. A void so deep it threatened to swallow them both. The emotions crashed through their bond before Logan slammed his mental walls up, cutting off the connection so abruptly it left Valen reeling.

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Valen immediately let the borrowed form dissolve, returning to his natural state of swirling energy before solidifying back into his previous azure-skinned shape. His tentacles curled protectively around himself, responding to his mate's distress even as he struggled to understand it.

Logan had pressed himself against the headboard, eyes squeezed shut, hands clenched into white-knuckled fists in the bedsheet.

"I'm sorry," Valen whispered in Logan's language, the words clumsy on his tongue. He wanted desperately to reach out, to comfort, to understand, but the raw pain still radiating from his mate kept him frozen in place. "Sorry."

When Logan finally opened his eyes, they were bright with unshed tears. He stared at Valen for a long moment, his jaw working as if trying to form words. Finally, he managed a rough whisper: "Just... stay in your own form. Please."

Valen nodded. Logan's language was still strange to him, but it wasn't hard to puzzle out what he wanted. Valen had meant to comfort, to please, but had somehow caused pain instead. The urge to touch, to reestablish their mental connection and understand what had gone wrong, was almost overwhelming. But he forced himself to remain still, giving Logan the space he seemed to need.

He should go and check on his spacecraft. With a little bit of luck, it had sent out a distress call last night. If his family received it, they would be here soon, and they would help him fix this mess he'd created.

Logan watched as the monster—Valen—left out the same door he'd come in through

last night.

Real. This was real.

He pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes, trying to block out the image of Jeff's face morphing out of that strange light. Even now, his chest ached from the shock of it. He'd thought he was doing fine, and then along came this thing and shattered his composure in an instant. And Valen didn't even know what he'd done, did he?

A wave of... something... washed over him. Not his own emotions, but a distant echo of concern and regret that had to be coming from Valen.

What was he doing out there?

And would he return?

"Get it together," Logan muttered, forcing himself to sit up. His body protested, muscles sore in ways he'd forgotten were possible.

The familiar routine of getting dressed helped steady his nerves, though he also had to throw away the clothes he'd worn yesterday, and his body ached in a way that shouldn't have been pleasant, yet somehow was.

That strange echo of emotion washed over him again, stronger this time. Distress. Frustration. They weren't his feelings, but they pulled at something inside him, urging him to... what? Go after the monster who'd turned his world upside down?

"Not happening," he said firmly to his empty bedroom, but even as the words left his mouth, he found himself moving toward the window. Through the glass, he could see a faint trail in the snow leading into the woods. Toward where he'd seen that strange

pod last night.

The smart thing would be to let Valen go. Return to his quiet life. Pretend this had all been some elaborate dream brought on by grief and loneliness.

Hell, the smart thing might even be to jump in his car and get back to the city, but it had been snowing the past few days, and he doubted that the roads had been cleared yet.

Ordinarily, Logan liked it this way, being cut off from the rest of the world.

Right now, it meant he had to deal with this creature by himself.

He reached for his boots.

The cold morning air bit at his face as he stepped outside. He hesitated on the porch, scanning the tree line.

Another wave of foreign emotion hit him, stronger now that he was outside. Panic? No, more like urgent concern. Logan's feet started moving before his brain could catch up, following the trail into the woods.

What was he doing? He should be calling... someone. The police? The military? NASA? Instead, he was trudging through knee-deep snow after the thing that had broken into his cabin and...

Don't, he told himself firmly. Don't think about last night.

But his body remembered. Even now, there was a lingering warmth where Valen had touched him, like phantom fingerprints – or tentacle prints – branded into his skin. And that pull in his chest, drawing him forward...

He crested a small rise and stopped short. Below him lay the impact site from last night, the snow melted in a wide circle around a sleek, tear drop-shaped vessel. Valen hovered near it, examining what appeared to be a damaged panel.

This was a space ship, wasn't it?

And Valen the alien that had spilled out of it.

"Fuck..." Logan muttered to himself.

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Valen stilled, then turned, those vertical topaz eyes fixing on Logan with an intensity that made his breath catch. Through their connection – and god, he really needed to process that particular development – he felt a mix of surprise, relief, and... shame?

Logan's mind raced with questions, but his tongue felt frozen. What exactly did you say to the alien who'd fucked you into oblivion last night?

Valen's tentacles curled inward, a gesture that somehow conveyed uncertainty. Logan caught fragments of thoughts. Not words exactly, but intentions. Apology. Explanation. Crash.

"Your ship," Logan managed finally, gesturing at the egg-shaped vessel. "Is it...?" He trailed off, not sure how to finish that sentence. Broken? Fixable? Going to bring more aliens to these woods?

Valen's response came as a mixture of foreign sounds and impressions pushed through their connection. The meaning was clear enough: something was very wrong with the ship.

"Great," Logan muttered, shoving his hands into his pockets. "Just great." He should turn around. Go back to his cabin. Call someone who actually knew how to deal with crashed alien spaceships. Instead, he found himself taking a step closer, drawn by the genuine distress radiating from Valen.

The alien's skin pulsed with soft light as Logan approached, those topaz eyes tracking his movement. When Logan was within arm's reach, Valen extended one tentacle, slowly, carefully, as if approaching a spooked animal.

Logan tensed, memories of last night flooding back. The touch, the heat, the overwhelming sensation of connection. But this was different. Valen was asking permission this time, not just grabbing what he wanted.

"You want to show me something?" Logan asked.

Valen gently touched his wrist, sending a spark through Logan's system. Not the overwhelming heat of last night, but something deeper, clearer. Like static clearing from a radio signal. Easier to communicate this way, Valen's thoughts came through.

"You're in my head," Logan said, fighting the urge to yank his hand away. It wasn't an unpleasant sensation, just... intimate. Different from the vague emotional echoes he'd felt earlier.

The mating bond allows it. A pause, then... I should have explained before...

"Before jumping me in the middle of the night?" The words came out sharper than Logan intended, but he couldn't quite keep the bitterness from his voice. "Yeah, that might have been nice."

The heat overwhelmed me, Valen communicated, and then a flood of impressions as if he hurried to explain himself. A planned diplomatic journey to another system, Valen getting into his pod, waking up here, confused and driven to complete the objective of his journey.

"You weren't supposed to land here," Logan translated aloud, trying to process the stream of information. "You were heading somewhere else?"

Yes. Arranged mating ceremony. Crystalline Empire. Images formed in Logan's mind: crystalline beings, formal ceremonies, political alliances. Then Valen's voice again. Not proper behavior for prince. Should not have...

"Wait." Logan's free hand shot up. "Prince? You're a prince?"

Valen glanced aside. Third heir to Nexan throne. Was meant to secure alliance through mating. Instead...

The alien's grip on Logan's wrist tightened slightly as more complicated concepts pushed through their connection. Concepts about mating bonds, instinctual drives, and destiny.

"Oh god," Logan whispered as understanding dawned. "We're not just... This isn't just a one-night..." He couldn't finish the sentence, but he didn't need to. Valen's confirmation came through their link, clear as day.

They were bonded. Permanently.

Logan yanked his hand away, breaking their connection. The loss hit him like a physical blow, a sudden emptiness where Valen's thoughts had been. "No. No way." He stumbled back a step, snow crunching under his boots. "I didn't agree to this. You can't just..."

But he had agreed, hadn't he? In a way. Last night, when Valen had... when they'd...

No, he hadn't known what he was doing.

"This is insane," he muttered, running a hand through his hair. "I can't be bonded to an alien prince. I can't be bonded to anyone."

Valen made a soft, musical sound that somehow conveyed distress. One tentacle reached toward Logan, then pulled back, respecting the distance Logan had put between them. Through their connection, still there even without touch, just muted, Logan felt regret.

"Don't," Logan said, holding up a hand. "Just... don't. I need to think." He turned away from those earnest topaz eyes, staring instead at the alien ship. "Can you fix it?"

Another burst of alien sounds, but without the physical connection, Logan could only catch the general feeling of frustration and worry. Right. The translation thing only worked with touch.

Logan sighed, forcing himself to turn back to Valen. "Tell me," he said, extending his hand. "But just... just the ship stuff. Okay?"

Valen's tentacle tapped his wrist again. Damage extensive. Primary power core cracked. Secondary systems failing. Distress signal sent, maybe. I hope.

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"So someone might come for you, but for now you're stuck," Logan summarized. "Amazing." He looked around the woods. "If help comes, how long will it take? And what do you guys eat? I hope you like canned goods because I'm no great chef."

He turned his attention back to Valen who met his gaze but didn't offer any answers. Maybe he didn't have any.

Just as well. "You can come back to the cabin with me, but that thing you did before when you changed into... into a man I knew. Don't do that again."

I will not, Valen promised. Will not do anything.

Logan wasn't sure if he trusted that, but for now, he wasn't going to let him freeze to death out here in the woods.

"Come on then."

CHAPTER 3

Logan's skintched with dried sweat and... other things... from the night before. The trek through the snow hadn't helped either. He needed a shower, desperately, but that meant leaving Valen unsupervised. The alien prince currently hovered in the middle of his living room, azure skin glowing faintly and tentacles swaying gently as he examined everything with those striking topaz eyes.

"I need to..." Logan mimicked washing his hair, feeling ridiculous. How did you explain a shower to someone who probably cleaned themselves with sonic waves or

whatever advanced alien technology they had?

Valen's tentacle brushed his arm. Cleansing cycle?

"Something like that." Logan tried not to flinch at the contact. He felt too raw about everything right now. "Just... stay here, okay? Don't touch anything."

Through their connection, he felt Valen's mild amusement. I will remain still.

"Right." Logan glanced around the room, then had an idea. He grabbed the TV remote and pressed the power button. The screen flickered to life, showing what appeared to be a news report.

Visual entertainment device, Valen observed through their link. Primitive, but familiar concept.

"At least you won't be bored." Logan pulled away, breaking their connection. "Just... stay put. I'll be quick."

As he headed for the bathroom, he could feel Valen's curiosity radiating through their bond, focused intently on the TV screen.

Well, good.

Maybe he'd learn something.

Logan emerged from the bathroom feeling marginally better, toweling his hair dry as he walked into the living room. He stopped short. The news program was gone, replaced by bright colors and exaggerated holiday cheer. On screen, someone in garish Christmas clothing bounded through New York City with childlike wonder.

Valen hovered closer to the TV, totally wrapped up in the movie. "Chri... Christmas," Valen said aloud, testing the word. "Humans celebrate?"

Logan's chest tightened. "Yeah, we do." He kept his voice neutral, fighting back memories of decorating trees and hanging stockings. Of brighter times.

"Important holiday?" Valen's voice was clear, the way he spoke almost too precise.

"Very important to some people." Logan tossed his towel over a chair, trying to redirect the conversation. "You're picking up language fast."

A tentacle reached toward him, hesitating. "Can touch?"

Logan nodded, and the gentle contact was immediate.

The entertainment device helps, Valen shared. Many new words. Natural words.

"The natural speech patterns help you?" Logan suggested.

Valen's tentacle withdrew as he attempted the words aloud. "Natural. Yes." His skin pulsed with soft light as he gestured at the TV with another tentacle. "Entertaining."

On screen, the movie's protagonist was now attempting to decorate a department store, causing cheerful chaos. Valen reached out again, touching Logan's arm.

Reminds me of my first diplomatic function. Many mistakes.

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Despite himself, Logan found his curiosity piqued. "Oh yeah? What happened?"

Valen's tentacle stayed lightly wrapped around Logan's arm. I was young, barely past metamorphosis. The delegation from the Crystalline Worlds arrived for trade negotiations. Their customs are... illuminating.

"How so?" Logan found himself settling onto the couch, Valen hovering beside him.

They communicate through light patterns. Very subtle. I was supposed to greet their Head Resonator with a specific pulse sequence. The glow under Valen's skin flickered in what might have been embarrassment. Instead, I got excited and...

"And?"

I lit up like a supernova. Overwhelmed their sensory arrays. Three of them crystallized in shock. It took days for them to return to normal.

Logan's eyebrows rose at the absurdity of it all. "So you've always had a talent for making memorable first impressions?"

Valen's skin pulsed brighter. My father was not pleased. But the Crystalline delegation... His tentacle squeezed Logan's arm gently. They said I had 'refreshing enthusiasm.' The trade agreement was very favorable.

On screen, the movie's protagonist was now tangled in strings of Christmas lights. Valen's attention drifted back to it.

"Lights important... for Christmas?" he asked verbally, withdrawing his tentacle.

Logan's smile faded slightly. "Yeah. Very important. People put them everywhere. Trees, houses, streets..."

"You do not have lights here," Valen observed, gesturing at Logan's decidedly undecorated cabin.

"No," Logan said quietly. "I don't."

Before Logan could sink too deep into his memories, Valen's physical form began to shift again. This time, however, he did not transform into a human. In fact, he took no solid shape at all. His azure skin dissolved into pure light, swirling patterns of purple and blue dancing through the air like an aurora. The room filled with a soft, pulsing glow that reminded Logan of Christmas lights, but infinitely more alive.

Logan stared, transfixed. How was any of this real?

And had this alien just turned itself into Christmas lights for him?

"What are you...?"

The light condensed slightly, reaching out a tendril to touch his arm. I am made of light. Do you like it?

"This is your true form?" Logan asked, recalling the strange light he'd seen in the woods.

It's close to it.

"Then why the other form?" Logan gestured vaguely at where Valen's tentacled form

had been moments before.

I chose that form for you, Valen's thoughts carried a hint of amusement. It is customary for us to take a form pleasing to our mates.

"Jesus." Logan ran a hand through his damp hair, fighting back a mix of embarrassment and defensive anger. "You thought I wanted you to have tentacles?"

Did they not please you? The lights swirled in what could only be described as a teasing pattern.

Holy shit, this was embarrassing, because how could Logan deny how pleased he'd been?

No need for shame, Valen's mental voice held a distinct note of satisfaction. I can be whatever form you like.

"So you just pulled the idea of that tentacle monster straight from my mind?" Logan's voice was rough with discomfort and a hint of lingering desire he'd rather not acknowledge.

You had such detailed imagery, Valen shared, his lights pulsing with clear amusement now. It seemed... optimal for our interaction.

"We're done talking about this." Logan stood up, needing space. "And stay out of my head."

There are more interesting forms in your mind. Should I choose one of them?

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"Don't even think about it."

Logan retreated to the kitchen, needing space and food. He rummaged through his cabinets, painfully aware that his supplies weren't exactly fit for alien royalty. Canned soup would have to do.

From the living room came the sounds of the movie, punctuated occasionally by Valen testing out new words. His pronunciation was improving rapidly, though Logan didn't think he'd ever sound entirely human.

Logan dumped the soup into a pot and turned on the burner. He'd have to figure out if Valen even needed to eat. Did beings of pure light require sustenance? And if they did, would Campbell's cut it?

When he returned with two bowls, Valen had shifted back to his tentacled form and was hovering near the couch. His eyes fixed on the steaming bowls with obvious curiosity.

"It's soup," Logan explained, setting them on the coffee table. "Chicken noodle."

Valen drifted closer, examining the bowl. A tentacle delicately lifted a noodle. "This is... sustenance?"

"It's food, yeah."

Valen did not seem entirely convinced of this.

Logan offered him a spoon. "Just... try it."

Valen's tentacles manipulated the spoon with surprising dexterity. He took a taste, then went completely still.

"That bad?"

"It is..." Valen seemed to search for diplomatic phrasing. "Different from meals I am accustomed to."

Logan snorted. "Yeah, well, sorry it's not fit for royalty."

"The texture is most..." Valen paused. "Interesting." His speech was so much better already. Logan couldn't help but admire the speed at which this alien learned.

He tried to take the bowl back from Valen. "You don't have to eat it."

"No, no. I will... appreciate this cultural experience." Valen's tentacle lifted another spoonful with what could only be described as an adventurer's determination.

They both settled on the couch and ate in silence for a moment, the movie still playing quietly in the background. Finally, Logan asked the question that had been nagging at him.

"What happens when your people find you?"

Valen set his spoon down carefully. "I hope they know of a way to fix my mistakes."

"Your mistakes?"

"Our bonding."

Logan's chest tightened unexpectedly. "Oh."

"I won't make you leave your world," Valen continued softly. "And I... I cannot stay. The bond would make leaving... difficult."

"Difficult how?"

"Painful," Valen admitted. "For both of us. But my family might know a way to break it cleanly."

Logan stared down at his soup, no longer hungry. "Right. That would be... that would be best."

Valen's tentacle twitched, as if wanting to reach out, but remained withdrawn. "Yes," he agreed, though his voice held an odd note. "Best."

They sat in heavy silence.

After a few minutes, Valen spoke up. "This soup," he said, "does it typically contain such high levels of sodium?"

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Despite everything, Logan found himself laughing. "Shut up and enjoy your cultural experience."

"I shall."

Logan dipped a cracker in his soup and looked out the window. It had begun to snow, fat white flakes. Just wonderful.

Eating his cracker, he turned back to Valen, contemplating how little he still knew about this alien. "How old are you?"

"In Earth measurements?" Valen's topaz eyes flickered with consideration. "I do not know how your planet marks time."

"How do you measure it on your world?"

"We measure by the resonance cycles of our binary stars." Valen's tentacles moved in what might have been a scholarly gesture. "I have existed for approximately three-quarters of a full harmonic convergence."

Logan stared at him. "That means absolutely nothing to me."

"How do you measure time?"

"We..." Logan paused, realizing how arbitrary it might sound. "We measure how many times our planet goes around our sun. That's one year. I'm thirty-four years old."

"Your measurement is based on planetary rotation?" Valen sounded fascinated.
"Primitive but... elegant in its simplicity."

"Thanks. I think." Logan stirred his soup. "Where exactly is your planet, anyway?"

"Nexa exists in what you would call..." Valen made a series of musical tones that definitely weren't English.

"In what I would call what?"

"Your language lacks the proper sounds."

"How far is that from Earth?"

Valen tilted his head thoughtfully. "I was in... sleep... when I crashed so I can't be sure. My ship's instruments... They are no longer useful."

Logan nodded. "So... if your people do come for you, how long do you think it'll take them?"

"I still don't..." Valen cut himself off, frustrated with something. One of his tentacles reached out to touch Logan again. Logan got the impression of a clock, an hourglass, days turning into nights. "Seconds, minutes, hours, days..." Valen mused. "I think I understand."

"What do you understand?"

"Your time." Valen withdrew his appendage. "It would take... a few days?"

That might not be too bad. "Your people travel fast."

"They're already traveling," Valen corrected. "I was not alone. Alone in my pod, but there were other pods."

"I see." Logan set his half-eaten soup down and ran a hand through his hair.

"Am I... a burden to you?"

"It's just a lot to process." Logan sighed. "Yesterday I was alone in my cabin, and today I'm bonded to an alien prince from a faraway galaxy who thinks Campbell's soup is a cultural experience."

Valen's skin brightened slightly. "This soup is very... exotic."

"You're a snob, you know that?"

"I'm discerning."

Logan snorted. "Right. So what's the food like on Nexa?"

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"We don't always need to... consume like this," Valen added, gesturing at the soup. "Sometimes we simply absorb energy from surrounding stars."

"Like photosynthesis?"

Valen tilted his head, clearly accessing the word from what he'd learned. "Similar, yes. And sometimes..." His skin glowed brightly. "Sometimes a good coupling can sustain us for days."

Logan nearly choked on air. "A good what now?"

"The sharing of energy during mating." Valen grinned. "It is very... nourishing."

"Are you telling me that last night was basically dinner for you?"

"More like a feast." Valen studied him. "Was it not like that for you?"

Logan felt his face heat. "That's not... I mean, humans don't..."

"No?" One of Valen's tentacles reached out, hovering just inches from Logan's arm. "May I show you something?"

Logan hesitated. What did Valen want to show him, and did Logan want to see?

Whatever it was, it would 100% be related to sex, and Logan was already struggling to keep his mind from going there. It was bad enough that he could still feel where Valen had entered him last night.

Fuck, what a night that had been.

"Logan?" Valen waited for a response.

Logan exhaled and gave in. He might as well learn as much as he could.

The moment Valen's tentacle touched his skin, his mind filled with sensations that weren't his own. He saw their encounter last night from Valen's point of view. Energy, flowing and pulsing, an exchange more intimate than mere physical pleasure. He felt what Valen had felt, a desire for connection, for intertwining with his mate, fulfilling his every need.

He saw himself in Valen's eyes, blissed out, twitching and squirming as Valen's tentacles thickened inside of him.

Logan jerked back, breaking the contact. "That's... that was..."

"You enjoyed that," Valen said. "So did I." His tentacle curled around Logan's wrist, almost possessively.

Blood rushed to Logan's groin.

Fuck.

I could show you more, Valen's thoughts purred through their connection. Last night was just instinct. Now I understand your form better...

Images flooded Logan's mind: tentacles caressing every sensitive spot, wrapping around him with delicious pressure, sliding inside him to claim him more thoroughly than any human could.

I know how much you enjoyed being filled, Valen's mental voice was rich with promise. I could make you lose your mind slowly this time. Keep you on the edge of pleasure for hours. Make you forget everything else.

Logan's whole body throbbed with want.

Why did this alien have to have intimate knowledge of all of Logan's kinks? He could feel himself hardening, his skin flushing with heat as Valen shared more detailed imagery of exactly what he could do with those tentacles, how he could stuff his mouth, his ass?—

"Stop." Logan yanked his arm away, stumbling to his feet, though every cell in his body screamed at him not to break the contact. "Just... stop."

Valen's light dimmed slightly, his eyes studying Logan with obvious confusion. "Your body responds. Your mind yearns. Every part of you wants this. Why do you resist?"

"It's not that simple." Logan's voice was rough.

"Explain?" Valen's tentacles curled inward, making him seem smaller, less threatening, though Logan could still feel the charged energy between them. "Have I misunderstood human mating customs?"

Logan ran a hand through his hair, pacing. His skin felt too tight, too hot, and Valen's presence wasn't helping. Those promises of pleasure still echoed in his mind, making it hard to think straight. "No. Yes. I mean..." He exhaled sharply. "Look, humans... we don't just... Some of us need..."

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"Show me?" Valen extended a tentacle in offering.

Logan stared at it for a long moment before accepting the contact. He thought of Jeff, of their first Christmas together, decorating the tree, the way Jeff's eyes lit up when he laughed. The accident. The empty house afterward. The grief that still felt raw even years later.

Valen withdrew his tentacle slowly. "You still love him."

"Yeah." Logan's voice cracked. "I do."

"And this prevents new pleasure?" Valen's tone held genuine confusion. "New... connections?"

"It shouldn't." Logan slumped onto the couch. "But every time I feel something for someone else, it feels like... like I'm betraying him."

"Even though your body craves touch?" Valen asked. "Even though you ache with loneliness?"

"That's not fair," Logan whispered. "You have no right to dig through my mind."

Valen tilted his head as if he did not understand this protest. "You are my mate. Of course I know your mind."

"I never asked to be your mate."

Valen recoiled.

A gust of wind rattled the cabin windows, drawing both their attention. The snow had picked up considerably, creating a white wall beyond the glass. The forecast hadn't mentioned a storm, but mountain weather was unpredictable at best.

"We're going to be stuck here for a bit," Logan said. "So let's lay down some ground rules. First," Logan held up a finger, "no more reading my thoughts without permission. My mind isn't yours to explore whenever you want."

Valen's tentacles coiled in what might have been discomfort. "But we are bonded. Sharing thoughts is... natural."

"Not for humans." Logan's voice was firm. "We keep our thoughts private. It's important to us."

"Your rule goes against the very nature of bonding."

"Well, maybe you should have thought about that before you bonded with someone from a different species without their permission."

The words hung heavy in the air between them. Valen's light dimmed considerably, his tentacles drooping. "I..." Valen shook his head. "I did not intend... The mating heat..."

Logan's anger softened slightly at the genuine distress in Valen's voice. "Look, I get that you weren't exactly thinking clearly. But now we have to deal with the consequences. And that means respecting each other's boundaries."

"How..." Valen seemed to struggle with the words. "How will I know what you need if I cannot feel it?"

"You could try asking."

Valen absorbed this for a moment. "May I... share something? Through our bond?"

Logan hesitated, then nodded. "Alright."

A tentacle reached out, touching his arm gently. Through their connection, Logan felt a complex mix of emotions: remorse, confusion, fear of isolation. He saw glimpses of Nexanculture, where the sharing of thoughts and emotions was as natural as breathing.

"Oh," Logan said softly as Valen withdrew. "It's really that important to you, isn't it?"

"Yes." Valen's voice was quiet. "But I will... try. To respect your human ways."

The wind howled outside, rattling the windows again. Logan looked at the alien prince hovering in his living room, trying to bridge a gap between their species that seemed impossibly wide.

"Maybe," Logan said carefully, "we can find a middle ground. You can ask before sharing thoughts or touching. And I'll... I'll try to be less offended by it."

Valen's skin brightened slightly. "This is... acceptable."

"Okay. Second rule. You don't try to seduce me anymore. We're not going to have sex again."

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Valen's entire form stilled, his topaz gaze fixing on Logan with an intensity that made the human shift uncomfortably.

"That is..." Valen's tentacles coiled tightly. "Problematic."

"Excuse me?"

"For the bond to be formed properly, it is necessary that?—"

"No." Logan stood up, needing the height advantage. "Whatever alien biology you're about to explain to me, the answer is still no."

"Before you make that decision, there is... something you should know."

Dread settled in Logan's stomach. "What now?"

"The nectar I shared with you during our..." Valen paused, searching for the right word. "During our coupling."

Logan's face heated at the memory. That sweet, intoxicating liquid that had made everything feel so good. Yeah, he remembered that. "What about it?"

"It is part of our bonding process," Valen explained. "For a few days, it creates a... physical dependency."

"Youdruggedme?"

"No!" Valen's tentacles spread wide in what looked like alarm. "It is not a drug. It is... a biological necessity for bonding between species. It helps your body adapt to mine."

"Adapt how?"

"The nectar contains elements of my energy signature. It allows your human form to... resonate with mine." Valen's topaz eyes fixed on Logan. "Without continued contact, the resonance will become unstable."

"And then what? Does it kill me?"

"No, no." Valen's tentacles moved in what seemed like a calming gesture. "Not death. But your body needs time to adjust to the initial bonding. The nectar helps with this transition."

Logan's eyes narrowed. "How long?"

"A few days. Perhaps a week." Valen's skin pulsed softly. "You will need regular... doses during this time."

"And if I don't?"

"Fever. Muscle pain. Disorientation." Valen's topaz eyes fixed on him. "Very uncomfortable."

"Right." Logan ran a hand through his hair. "And the nectar itself? Any side effects I should know about?"

Valen was quiet for a moment. "It is... highly stimulating."

"Meaning?"

"The nectar enhances physical desire. Significantly." Valen's tentacles curled inward. "It will make you crave sex."

For fuck's sake. "You're telling me it's some kind of alien aphrodisiac?"

"Yes." At least Valen had the grace to look uncomfortable. "A very potent one."

"So those are my options?" Logan laughed bitterly. "Either I suffer through withdrawal symptoms, or I drink your sex juice and spend hours fighting off the urge to jump you?"

"I would not... force the intimacy," Valen said carefully. "Even if you are... aroused."

"How generous of you." Logan slumped onto the couch. "When do I need the next dose?"

Valen drifted closer, his skin pulsing with a soft glow. "Soon. Your body temperature is already elevated."

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Now that Valen mentioned it, Logan could feel a dull ache settling into his muscles, an uncomfortable warmth spreading under his skin. Nothing unbearable yet, but...

"And you're sure there's no other way?" Logan asked, though he already knew the answer.

"The nectar contains elements necessary for your adaptation." Valen shot him an apologetic look. "I cannot alter its... other effects."

Logan paced the living room. The ache in his muscles was getting worse. "How long does the aphrodisiac effect last?"

"I don't know." Valen's topaz eyes tracked his movement. "The intensity varies between individuals. The effects are immediate."

"Great." A memory of the previous night flashed through Logan's mind, the sweet taste, the way the nectar had made his whole body sing with pleasure, how desperately he'd wanted more... He looked at Valen. "You'll stay away from me while I'm... affected?"

"If that is what you wish." Valen's light dimmed slightly. "Though fighting the urge alone will be challenging for you. I do not wish for you to suffer."

"Yeah, well, I've had practice with self-control." Logan winced as another wave of discomfort rolled through him. "Let's just get this over with."

Valen hesitated. "Are you certain? The withdrawal symptoms might be preferable

to?—"

"To spending a few hours horny and frustrated?" Logan laughed without humor. "Pretty sure I can handle that better than fever and muscle failure. Just..." He exhaled sharply. "I'll be fine."

One of Valen's tentacles extended toward Logan, the tip already glistening with that silvery nectar.

Logan's heart hammered in his chest. He parted his lips, trying not to think about the last time he'd tasted this, trying not to remember how good it had felt, how much he'd wanted...

The first drop touched his tongue, sweet like honey. His whole body shuddered at the taste.

"Slowly," Valen murmured. "Let it absorb."

Logan swallowed, feeling the warmth spread through him immediately. The aches in his muscles began to fade, replaced by a different kind of tension.

Already, heat pooled in his gut.

"That's enough," he gasped, pulling back.

Valen withdrew immediately, putting distance between them. "The bed room," he said. "You can... deal with the effects there. I will remain here."

Logan nodded jerkily, already feeling too warm, too confined in his clothes. He needed to get away from Valen before he did something stupid.

"Logan?" Valen's voice was soft. "I am sorry. About all of this."

"Yeah." Logan's voice was strained. "Me too."

He practically fled to the bed room, slamming the door behind him. His whole body was on fire now, every nerve ending screaming for touch, for friction, for sex.

It was going to be a very long few hours.

CHAPTER 4

Logan collapsed onto his bed, his skin burning with need. Every brush of fabric against his body felt like torture. Too much and not enough at the same time.

The worst part wasn't even the physical arousal. It was the memories. Every touch, every sensation from last night played through his mind in vivid detail. The way Valen's tentacles had wrapped around him, the overwhelming pleasure of being filled, claimed...

"Stop it," he growled at himself, pressing the heels of his hands against his eyes.

But his traitorous mind wouldn't stop. And now he knew exactly what Valen was capable of, had seen inside his mind, knew all the ways the alien could take him apart...

Logan rolled onto his stomach, burying his face in his pillow. He couldn't do this. Couldn't let himself want this. It wasn't just about sex—it was about letting someone in again, about being vulnerable, about risking his heart.

Jeff's face flashed through his mind, and guilt twisted in his gut. Was he betraying Jeff's memory by wanting this? By letting another being touch him, claim him?

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But God, he was so empty.

His body throbbed with need, demanding attention. Logan knew he could take care of it himself, should take care of it himself. But he also knew it wouldn't be enough. Nothing would be enough except...

"No," he said aloud, voice rough. "Not happening."

Through their bond, he could feel Valen's presence in the other room. A constant, thrumming awareness that only made everything worse. The alien was probably monitoring his distress, feeling every wave of desperate need that rolled through him.

Logan pressed his face harder into the pillow, trying to block out everything. But he couldn't escape the memory of Valen's thoughts from earlier, the vivid images the alien had shared of what he could do. How he could wrap those tentacles around Logan's body, pin him down, fill him up until he couldn't think, couldn't breathe, couldn't do anything but feel...

His hips rocked involuntarily against the mattress.

"Fuck," he gasped, shame and arousal warring in his gut.

The really messed up part? He wasn't just remembering what had happened. His mind kept conjuring new scenarios, each more explicit than the last. Valen holding him down, taking him slowly this time, making him beg...

Logan rolled onto his back, staring at the ceiling with wild eyes. His heart hammered

in his chest, his whole body trembling with need.

He hadn't felt this kind of desperate want since... since Jeff. The thought sent another shock of guilt through him, but it couldn't compete with the burning in his veins.

You could have this, a treacherous voice in his mind whispered. He's right there. All you have to do is ask.

"No," Logan said again, but it sounded weak even to his own ears.

He was just going to jerk off, just to take the edge off. He slid a shaking hand down his body, and even that simple touch felt electric, his skin hypersensitive from the nectar. He fumbled with his zipper, breathing ragged. He couldn't move fast enough.

But as soon as he wrapped his hand around himself, his fears were confirmed: this wasn't going to be enough. The nectar had left him wanting something else entirely, to be filled, claimed, taken.

"Goddammit," he groaned, stroking himself roughly.

Again, his mind flooded with memories of last night, tentacles wrapping around his thighs, spreading him open, pushing inside... He tried to think of something else, anything else, but it was impossible. Every fantasy circled back to Valen, to those exploring tentacles, to that overwhelming fullness...

His back arched off the bed as he worked himself faster, chasing release. But something was missing. He needed more, needed...

No. Fuck. Don't think about it. Don't think about?—

Release hit him hard and fast, his body jerking as pleasure crashed through him. For a

brief moment, everything went white-hot and blank.

Then the temporary high wore off.

Logan lay there, chest heaving, feeling somehow even worse than before. The edge was off, but the deep, gnawing need remained. If anything, it felt more intense now. A bone-deep ache for something his own hand couldn't give him.

"Shit," he muttered, grabbing tissues from the bedside table.

He cleaned himself up, but it felt pointless. His skin still burned, his body still craved touch. His self-administered climax had done nothing to quiet the demands of the nectar in his system.

How many hours until this wore off?

Through their bond, he caught a flicker of concern from Valen. Great.

Go away.

Logan grabbed a pillow and pressed it over his face, fighting back a mix of embarrassment and lingering desire.

He was going to die before this was over.

Valen hovered near the window, watching the snow build up outside, trying desperately not to focus on the waves of need and frustration radiating from the bedroom. Every surge of Logan's desire pulled at him, calling to his own instincts to claim, to possess, to help.

But he had promised to stay away.

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The last few hours had been... challenging. Three times he had felt Logan's desperate attempts to find relief, each one leaving his mate more frustrated than the last. Each time, Valen had forced himself to remain still, even as every part of his being screamed to go to him.

He didn't know what was worse; feeling Logan's physical need or the emotional turmoil that came with it. Guilt, desire, grief, shame... human emotions were so complicated.

The sound of the shower running drew his attention. Was this finally over for Logan, then?

Valen looked at the bedroom door with uncertainty. How did one approach a mate after such an experience? On Nexa, there would be no shame in seeking pleasure, no hesitation in asking for what was needed. But humans, he was learning, had so many layers of emotional complexity around physical intimacy.

Ultimately, Valen decided that he couldn't just stand there. He drifted toward the kitchen. Surely his mate would need sustenance after such an ordeal. It was the least he could do, given that he had caused this situation.

The kitchen, however, proved to be another challenge entirely. He examined the various appliances, trying to figure out the purpose of such primitive machines. The device on the counter, some sort of localized radiation chamber for heating food, seemed promising.

In the cold storage unit, he found several flat containers with food in them. Frozen

meals, designed to be heated. Simple enough. He picked the largest one.

Hopefully better than that 'soup' he'd had earlier.

His tentacles manipulated the packaging carefully. It was a simple enough procedure. Remove lid, place in radiation chamber, press buttons to set time. Good thing he'd already learned this planet's way of measuring time.

Valen watched the container rotate, pleased with himself for managing this simple human task. Through their bond, he could sense Logan's exhaustion, his lingering discomfort. He would welcome a meal, wouldn't he?

The container spun, the timer he'd set counting down. Steam began to build up inside the radiation device.

The shower shut off, but Logan didn't emerge immediately. Good. The meal would be ready when he?—

A popping sound from inside the cooking device. Was that normal? Some sort of sauce was bubbling quite vigorously now, splattering against the microwave's ceiling.

When the timer finally dinged, Valen carefully extracted the container with his tentacles. The sauce had settled, and everything looked... well, cooked at least.

"What are you doing?"

Logan's voice, rough and tired, made Valen turn in surprise. His mate stood in the hallway doorway, hair still damp, wearing fresh clothes.

Logan's eyes fixed on the container. "Is that..." His face went pale. "That's...that was supposed to be Christmas dinner."

Valen brightened. "Yes! I thought you might need sustenance."

Logan came closer, staring at the meal. "How long did you microwave it?"

"I thought fifteen minutes would be enough even for primitive technology."

Valen watched his mate carefully, pride in his accomplishment fading as he sensed a shift in Logan's emotional state. Something dark and heavy, like storm clouds gathering.

"Fifteen minutes! God, Valen, you can't just..." Logan's voice cracked as he ran his hand through his damp hair. The gesture seemed involuntary, stressed. Valen could feel waves of... was that anger? But why?

Desperate to understand, Valen reached out with his tentacles, trying to bridge their mental connection. "Let me understand."

"No!" Logan jerked back, nearly colliding with the counter behind him. "We have a rule about that, remember?"

The rejection stung. Valen couldn't help the frustrated sound that escaped him. "You promised to try to be open to it. I only want to understand." How else could he learn what he'd done wrong if Logan wouldn't let him see?

Logan's laugh was wrong, harsh and cold in a way even Valen could tell had nothing to do with joy. "You will never understand, and if it wasn't snowing so damn hard outside, I'd tell you to get the fuck out of my cabin."

The words hit like physical blows. Valen's form wavered, his hold on physical shape suddenly too much effort. Without conscious thought, he let himself shift back to his natural state, energy swirling with hurt and confusion.

"The cold doesn't affect me like this." His voice resonated through the air rather than coming from a physical form. "I'll go back to my ship."

He didn't wait for a response. Couldn't bear to see if Logan would reject him again. Instead, he flowed through the cabin's door and out into the storm.

The snow fell heavily around his energy form, but he barely noticed it. Physical sensations meant little in this state. Only the ache in what humans would call his heart remained real, pulsing in time with the bond that connected him to the mate who'd just pushed him away.

CHAPTER 5

Logan stood in his darkening kitchen, staring at the ruined meal. Steam still rose from the container, carrying the smell of overcooked food through the cabin. His hands clenched and unclenched at his sides, anger a hot knot in his chest as he looked at the waste of Mrs. Henderson's careful preparation, her yearly act of... what? Love? Pity?

Logan shoved the thought aside to focus his frustration back on Valen, who was responsible for this.

Damn alien couldn't leave anything alone. Couldn't respect a single boundary. The nectar, the attempts at getting into Logan's head, and now this.

Through their bond, he felt echoes of Valen's hurt. Distant now, muffled, like Valen was trying to shield him from it. Good. Let him hurt. Maybe then he'd learn that actions had consequences, that you couldn't just go around intruding on people without their permission.

He should clean this mess up, but even looking at the ruined meal made his blood pressure spike. The persistent effects of the nectar weren't helping, leaving him raw and oversensitive. His skin still hummed with unwanted awareness, his body aching from hours of fighting its influence.

Valen would be fine out there. He was some advanced alien being who could turn into light. A little snow wasn't going to hurt him.

Logan dragged himself to the couch, exhaustion warring with his anger. He just

needed to sit down for a moment. This day had been too much. The sexual exhaustion, the bond, and now this. Just... too much.

The couch welcomed him with familiar comfort as he sank into its worn cushions. Outside, snow continued to fall, heavy flakes drifting past the window. The bond tugged at him, a gentle pressure in his chest, pulling toward wherever Valen had gone.

Logan ignored it. Valen had made his choice. If he wanted to sulk in his ship, that was his problem.

He'd only rest for a moment. Just until this day stopped feeling like it was trying to drown him. Then he'd...

Sleep took him before he could finish the thought.

He woke to darkness and cold.

For a moment, Logan couldn't place where he was or why his neck ached so badly. Then awareness filtered in: the couch, the smell of wood, the dying fire. Outside, the storm had picked up, wind howling through the trees.

How long had he slept?

He fumbled for his phone, wincing at the bright display. 6:47 PM. Christ. He'd been out for hours.

Something pulled uncomfortably in his chest, like a muscle stretched too far. Valen was still out there, still distant. Still hurt. Logan tried to ignore that last part, but it was harder now. The anger that had sustained him earlier had drained away during his sleep, leaving him hollow.

This was what he'd wanted, wasn't it? To be left alone with his grief, his traditions, his memories of Jeff. He'd driven three hours into the wilderness specifically for this solitude. And now that he had it—now that Valen had actually given him what he'd been asking for...

The loneliness of his cabin looked sad rather than welcoming.

If Jeff could see him now, he'd tell him to get off his ass and stop moping.

What had become of him?

Something lost and pitiable.

The kind of bitter person who'd send someone else out into the snow.

Logan pushed himself up, muscles protesting. The nectar's effects had mostly faded, leaving only a bone-deep weariness in their wake. He should probably eat something. Should definitely restart the fire before the cabin got any colder.

His gaze drifted to the kitchen, where he knew the ruined meal still sat. Jeff's mom had started bringing him these Christmas dinners the year after... after. "You shouldn't be alone," she'd said. "Even if you refuse to be with us, you should have a proper Christmas dinner."

He'd never told her he couldn't bear to eat them. That they sat in his freezer until spring, when guilt finally forced him to throw them out. Easier to accept them than explain why every bite would taste like ash.

And now this year's dinner was actually ruined by someone who'd tried to take care of him, and he'd thrown a tantrum over it.

The wind rattled the windows, and Logan shivered. The temperature had dropped with the sun. How cold was it out there now? Valen had said the cold didn't affect him in his energy form, but was that true? Or was it just an impulsive statement from someone who'd been hurt and wanted to leave?

The bond twinged again. Logan pressed a hand to his chest, trying to interpret what he was feeling through it. Distance, yes. Hurt, definitely. But something else too. A sort of... resigned acceptance that made his stomach twist.

He got up and walked to the window. In the gathering dark, he could barely make out the shapes of trees thrashing in the wind. It was still snowing too.

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Somewhere out there was a damaged spaceship. And Valen.

Logan's throat tightened. God, what a mess. He'd made this cabin his sanctuary, a place to hide from the world and its messy emotions. From people who could hurt him, or worse, people he could hurt. Five years of carefully constructed solitude, of Christmas traditions built around absence rather than presence.

And then Valen had crashed into his life, all tentacles and good intentions and absolute disregard for human customs. Had claimed him, tried to take care of him... even if he did it all wrong.

The ruined meal didn't matter. Not really. Logan had just needed an excuse to do what he always did: pushed away anyone who tried to get close.

Only this time, thanks to their bond, he could actually feel the consequences of that pushing.

And now Valen sat alone by his ship, probably wondering what the hell he'd done wrong, unable to understand why a simple meal had caused such pain.

Logan leaned his forehead against the cold glass. He should go after him. Should at least explain. But the words stuck in his throat even in imagination. How did you explain years of grief? Of deliberate isolation? Of Christmas dinners you couldn't eat because they tasted like memories?

The bond pulled at him again, stronger this time. Or maybe he was just finally letting himself feel it.

"Damn it." He pushed away from the window. The coat rack by the door held his heavy winter jacket. He put it on and then grabbed his boots.

He didn't let himself think too hard about what he was doing. If he thought about it, he'd talk himself out of it. He would convince himself that Valen was fine, that the cold really didn't affect him.

The blast of arctic air as he opened the door stole his breath. The storm had gotten worse, wind driving the snow nearly sideways. Logan pulled his collar up higher and stepped out onto the porch.

That tugging sensation in his chest, led him toward the woods where he'd first found Valen's ship. He followed it, pushing through snow that was already knee-deep in places. The wind cut through his jacket like it was made of paper.

He'd gone maybe fifty yards when he saw a familiar blue-purple glow through the curtain of snow. Before he could even call out, the light surged toward him, cutting through the storm like a comet.

"You shouldn't be out here!" Valen's voice came from everywhere at once, his energy form swirling around Logan in agitation. "Your body temperature is dropping!"

"I'm fine," Logan managed through chattering teeth. He hadn't realized how cold he'd gotten until Valen mentioned it. "I needed to?—"

"You need to go back inside." Valen's light pulsed with concern, casting strange shadows across the snow. "Whatever you came to say can wait."

"No." Logan wrapped his arms around himself, as much to keep Valen from trying to herd him back to the cabin as for warmth. "It can't wait. I need to apologize."

Valen's swirling slowed, his light dimming slightly. Even in this form, Logan could feel his uncertainty through their bond.

"I should have told you earlier. Should have explained instead of just..." Logan's teeth were chattering too hard to continue. The cold had worked its way into his bones, making everything feel distant and sluggish.

The light around him brightened suddenly, and warmth began seeping into his clothes, his skin. Valen's energy form pressed closer, creating a barrier between Logan and the storm.

"Tell me inside," Valen said, his voice gentler now. "Please. Let me get you warm first."

Logan wanted to argue, to get the words out now while he had the courage, but his body was already leaning into Valen's warmth. He managed a small nod.

Valen's light wrapped around him more firmly, guiding him back toward the cabin. Through their bond, Logan felt the alien's concern warring with lingering hurt, and underneath it all, a fierce protectiveness that made his throat tight.

When they entered the cabin, Valen immediately shifted back to his corporeal form, moving swiftly to the fireplace. His tentacles worked efficiently, arranging logs and stoking the dying embers back to life. Logan stood in the entryway, his fingers too numb to work the zipper of his jacket.

"Let me," Valen said, coming to help him. His touch was careful, hesitant, so different from his usual confidence. Through their bond, Logan felt him struggling with the urge to do more, to wrap Logan up completely in his warmth.

But he was respecting boundaries now. Trying to.

Logan let out a shaky breath, watching as flames began to catch on the fresh logs. "The Christmas dinner," he started, then stopped. How could he explain?

Valen's tentacles stilled on the zipper of Logan's coat.

"Jeff's mom sends them," he finally managed. "Every year since... since he died. She doesn't want me to be alone on Christmas. To not have a proper holiday meal." He swallowed hard. "I never told her I can't eat them. That they sit in the freezer until spring because even looking at them hurts too much."

Valen's expression showed understanding. "And I ruined this one."

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"No." Logan ran a hand through his hair, still damp from the snow. "I mean, yes, but... that's not why I got angry. Or it is, but..." He made a frustrated sound. "I'm not explaining this right."

Valen guided him toward the couch with gentle pressure from his tentacles, pausing only to grab the thick blanket from the back of Logan's reading chair. "You're still cold," he said, his topaz eyes reflecting the firelight. "Let me help with that first."

Logan didn't resist as Valen wrapped the blanket around his shoulders. He should probably change out of his wet jeans, but the thought of moving seemed impossible right now. The fire was beginning to warm the cabin, sending shadows dancing across the walls.

"I chose to be alone," Logan said finally, staring into the flames. "After Jeff died. His mom, she... she tries so hard to keep me connected. To make sure I still have holidays, traditions, family." His voice cracked on the last word. "And I just keep pushing everything away. Everyone away."

Valen settled beside him, close enough that Logan could feel his warmth but not quite touching. A tentacle gestured toward the kitchen. "Like you pushed me away."

"Yeah." Logan's throat felt tight. "I'm good at that. Really fucking good at it." He turned to look at Valen. "But feeling you out there, through the bond... knowing exactly how much I hurt you..."

"You were protecting yourself," Valen said softly.

"I should have explained instead of exploding. Could have told you why that dinner meant something. Why Christmas is..." He trailed off, searching for words.

Valen's tentacles shifted restlessly. "On Nexa, we have ceremonies for grief. Times when the whole community shares in one person's pain. But humans..." He paused, choosing his words carefully. "You carry your grief alone."

Wasn't that the truth of it? "Not all of us do that. Just me."

"I think," Valen continued, a tentacle ghosting over the blanket on Logan's shoulder, "perhaps we both need to learn. Me about human boundaries, and you about not being alone."

Logan leaned into the tentacle's touch without really meaning to. Even through the blanket, the contact sent warmth spreading through him. Or maybe that was the bond, humming contentedly now that they were close again.

"I don't know how," he admitted quietly. "To not be alone. I'm out of practice."

"Then we will practice together." Another tentacle brushed Logan's hair, still damp from the snow. "Though perhaps with less destruction of your food items."

The attempt at humor startled a laugh out of Logan. "Yeah, maybe let's skip the microwave experiments for a while." He sobered, looking toward the kitchen. "I should clean up in there."

"I will help," Valen said, starting to rise.

Logan caught one of his tentacles. "No, I... can we just stay here for a minute?" The fire's warmth was finally seeping into his bones, and the thought of moving seemed impossible. "I'm still cold."

Valen settled back immediately, his tentacles rearranging the blanket more securely around Logan. After a moment's hesitation, he carefully wrapped one appendage around Logan's shoulders.

Through their bond, Logan felt Valen's uncertainty, his desire to offer comfort. But he was afraid of overstepping again. The alien's usual confidence had been shaken by their fight, replaced with a cautious gentleness that made Logan's chest ache.

"This is okay," Logan said softly. "The touching. I know I've been sending mixed signals about it."

"You needed space," Valen said. "After the nectar..."

"Yeah, but that wasn't your fault. Not really."

Through their bond, Logan felt Valen relax slightly. The fire crackled, casting dancing shadows across the walls, and for the first time, the silence between them felt comfortable rather than strained.

This was nice.

Logan picked up the remote. "Would you like to learn more about this planet?"

"Yes." Valen sounded adorably eager.

Logan felt the corner of his mouth twitch up as he turned on the TV and found a nature documentary to watch. "This okay? It's about Earth's oceans."

The narrator had barely begun speaking when footage of an octopus appeared on screen. Logan felt a spike of curiosity through their bond.

"Logan," Valen asked, "do many humans find these creatures... attractive?"

"What? No!" Logan felt his face heat up as he realized what Valen was implying.

"They're just animals. That's not...I didn't choose this because—" He broke off as he felt Valen's amusement bubbling through their connection.

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"I'm just trying to understand your species' apparent fascination with tentacles," Valen said innocently, while one of his appendages deliberately tightened around Logan's waist.

"Cut it," Logan muttered, but he couldn't help smiling. It felt good to joke again, to feel the lightness in their bond after so much tension.

They settled into comfortable silence as the documentary continued, Valen occasionally commenting on the similarities and differences between Earth's ocean life and Nexa's. Logan found his eyes growing heavy, lulled by the narrator's voice and the warm security of Valen's embrace.

He didn't remember falling asleep. Just the gentle weight of Valen's tentacles, the soft glow of his skin, and the quiet certainty that, for the first time in years, he wouldn't be alone for the holidays.

CHAPTER 6

Valen emerged from his rest cycle to unfamiliar sounds. Rustling, soft thuds, and what seemed to be human muttering. He was still on the couch where Logan had fallen asleep against him the night before, but Logan himself was no longer there.

A clatter from across the cabin drew his attention.

When he went to investigate, he found Logan reaching up to the top shelf of a closet where several dusty cardboard boxes sat. Through their bond, Valen felt something he hadn't experienced from Logan before: a mix of melancholy and... anticipation?

The emotions swirled together like the aurora storms of his home world, complex and beautiful.

"What are you doing?" Valen asked.

Logan startled slightly, then relaxed when he saw Valen. "There should be decorations in here," he said, setting one box down on the floor. "Christmas decorations. Haven't put any up in... well, in a while."

Valen peered into the box. Inside, he could see delicate spheres made of glass, painted with intricate patterns of silver and blue, nestled in crumpled paper. "Christmas," he repeated carefully. He grasped that it was an important holiday, but he still wasn't entirely sure of its significance.

"Yeah." Logan knelt beside the box, carefully unwrapping one of the ornaments. "It's about family, giving gifts, celebrating..." He paused, then added more quietly, "Being together."

Through their bond, Valen felt the sharp edge of old pain in those last words, but it was softer now, cushioned by something warmer. Something hopeful.

Valen watched as Logan pulled all the boxes from the closet and began sorting through them, creating small piles of different items. Valen wanted to help but didn't know where to start.

"First thing," Logan said, pulling out a long string of tiny lights, "is to untangle these." He sat cross-legged on the floor, frowning at the jumbled mess in his lap. "This is such a headache every time."

"Is it?" Valen settled beside him, fascinated by the way the morning light caught the small glass bulbs.

Logan's hands stilled for a moment. "Jeff loved Christmas lights. Said they made everything magical. But no matter how neatly we packed away the strings... they'd always be a mess by the next year." Through their bond, Valen felt the memory's bittersweet warmth.

Valen carefully touched a loop of lights with his tentacles. "May I help?"

Logan nodded, some of the tension leaving his shoulders. "Yeah. Just be careful. If you use too much force..." He broke off as Valen's tentacles efficiently began working through the knots, separating strand from strand with ease. "Oh. That's... actually really useful."

Valen felt a spark of pleasure at Logan's impressed tone. "We have similar illumination strands on Nexa, though ours respond to emotional resonance rather than electricity. Sometimes it makes them flicker a lot." He paused, realizing something. "Is this why your emotions have been all over the place? These memories?"

Logan was quiet for a moment, his fingers tracing one of the untangled strands. "Yeah, I guess so." He took a deep breath. "But it's good, I think. Like... like finally opening a door that's been locked for too long."

Through their bond, Valen felt the truth of those words, felt the way Logan was deliberately choosing to face these memories rather than hide from them. Pride and affection swelled in his chest, and he had to resist the urge to wrap Logan in his tentacles.

"Tell me about these traditions?" he asked instead, holding up the now-untangled strings of lights. "How do we honor them properly?"

The smile that spread across Logan's face was small but genuine. "Well," he said, standing and offering Valen a hand up, "first we need to figure out if these still work.

And then I'll show you how humans make their homes glow for the darkest part of their year."

Together, they plugged in each strand of lights, Logan explaining how to spot the burned-out bulbs while Valen marveled at the way the tiny lights made Logan's eyes sparkle. Most of the strands still worked, which seemed to make his mate happy.

"Now we hang them," Logan said. "Usually around the windows first." He stopped as Valen's tentacles gently took the lights from his hands. "What are you...?"

Valen extended himself upward, his tentacles easily reaching the top of the window frame. "Guide me? I believe I can be more efficient at this task."

A burst of surprised amusement came through their bond. "Show-off," Logan muttered, but Valen could feel his appreciation. "Okay, you want to start at the top left corner, then drape them evenly across..."

They worked their way around the cabin's main room, Valen's tentacles making quick work of hanging the lights while Logan directed him on their placement.

"The tree is next," Logan said once they'd finished with the lights. He was looking at a large box in the corner, his emotions turning complex again. "If you want to help with that too."

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"Tree?" Valen studied the box with curiosity. "You bring vegetation inside?"

"An artificial one, actually." Logan opened the box, revealing sections of green synthetic branches. "It's tradition to decorate an evergreen tree for Christmas. Real ones are nice, but..." He shrugged. "This is easier."

As they assembled the tree, Logan began explaining the tradition's origins and how it had changed throughout the years. Valen listened intently, fascinated by earth's history. "I don't have a gift for you," he interjected when Logan explained that part of the holiday.

"You've given me plenty already." Logan smiled softly.

When they were done assembling the tree, he opened a box with delicate ornaments. The decorated spheres Valen had noticed earlier. "We need to be careful with these," Logan said. "Some of them break easily."

"I'll be very careful," Valen promised, and as they worked their way through the box, Valen's tentacles proved perfect for reaching the higher branches, carefully placing each ornament where Logan directed.

At the bottom of the box, wrapped in yellowed newspaper, Logan found a star tree topper. He went very still as he unwrapped it.

"Logan?" Valen asked softly, feeling the sudden surge of emotion through their bond.

"We used to have one just like this," Logan said, his voice rough as he turned the

silver star in his hands. "Jeff and I, in our apartment in the city. He used to say it wasn't really Christmas until we'd nearly knocked the tree over trying to get the star on straight."

Valen moved closer, letting one tentacle rest lightly against Logan's back. He could feel the way Logan was working to stay present, to not let the memories overwhelm him.

"Would you like to put it up?" Valen asked.

Logan nodded, looking around for something to stand on. "Let me just grab the—" His words cut off in a startled yelp as Valen wrapped one tentacle securely around his waist, lifting him clear off the ground. "Jesus! A little warning next time?"

"Is this not helpful?" Valen asked innocently.

"I was going to get a chair," Logan grumbled, but there was no real annoyance in his voice.

The star caught the morning light as Logan set it in place.

"Beautiful," Valen said, though he wasn't sure if he meant the decoration or the way Logan's energy had steadied, finding balance between memory and the present moment.

"Okay, you can put me down now," Logan said. And then his stomach growled. He laughed as Valen set him down. "Sorry. I got so caught up in all this, I forgot about breakfast." He glanced toward the kitchen, then back at Valen. "Have you ever had hot chocolate?"

"Hot... chocolate?" The words were unfamiliar on Valen's tongue.

"Oh, you're in for a treat." Logan's excitement filtered through their bond.

He disappeared into the kitchen, Valen heard him humming something under his breath. The tune was unfamiliar but pleasant, and he felt Logan's spirits continuing to lift.

But underneath that contentment, Valen sensed something else: the first subtle signs of rising body temperature. Soon, Logan would need more nectar. The thought sent anxiety coiling through him. How could he broach the subject without ruining this moment of peace?

While Valen worried, rich aromas filled the cabin. Logan returned with two steaming mugs, tiny white things floating on top of the dark liquid. "Careful, it's hot," he warned, passing one to Valen's tentacle. "And those are marshmallows. They melt into it."

Valen watched, fascinated, as Logan took a careful sip and sighed contentedly. Through their bond came a wave of pure pleasure, memories of winter mornings and shared warmth.

The drink was good. Very sweet, but good. Valen could see why Logan liked it. It wasn't very nourishing, though. "You should eat something," Valen advised. His mate would need his strength soon.

Logan paused mid-sip, studying Valen over the rim of his mug. "Something's bothering you, I can feel it."

Valen's tentacles curled inward. "Your temperature... it's beginning to rise again."

"Ah." Logan was quiet for a moment, his fingers tracing the rim of his mug. Through their bond, Valen felt him processing this information, weighing options. Finally, he

looked up. "How long do we have before...?"

"Thirty minutes, perhaps." Valen licked his lips. "I don't want you to suffer like last time."

Logan took another slow sip of his hot chocolate, his emotions churning through their connection, anticipation, nervousness, but also... determination? Setting his mug down, he met Valen's gaze. "Don't let me suffer, then."

Did Valen dare to hope? "What do you mean?"

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Logan gave him the smallest of smiles. "Help me through it."

"Are you sure?"

"No." Logan laughed softly. His face flushed. "But I want this. I want you."

Valens hearts beat faster. Finally he would be able to take care of his mate the way he was meant to.

CHAPTER 7

Logan finished his breakfast quickly. Well, the first half of his breakfast. The second half was going to include Valen's nectar. The stuff that had made him so incredibly horny the last time he'd had it that he thought he was going to die.

But this time he wouldn't be alone with the heat.

This time Valen would be with him to make it all better.

His very own tentacle monster. The thought that Valen had chosen this form for him still made him shudder—both with faint embarrassment and desire.

"Let's head to the bedroom," Logan said as he put his used plate away. "We'll be more comfortable there." He led the way there, Valen hovering just behind him. He could feel the anticipation thrumming through their mental link, a combination of excitement and nervousness that perfectly matched his own.

He stopped in the middle of the room and turned toward Valen. "So how do we do this?" he asked.

Valen gave him a smile. "Let me take your clothes off. You won't want them in a minute."

That sounded about right. Yesterday, he'd become very horny very quickly after drinking the nectar. Helpfully, he lifted his arms. "Get right to it."

"You seem eager already." A teasing note entered Valen's mental voice as he reached out and undressed Logan carefully. His touch left tingles in its wake.

Logan looked at his alien. "I know you'll make it good."

He saw Valen's skin brightening with a glow that looked like happiness.

Valen reached out and touched his face tenderly. "I will. And you'll love every moment of it, my mate."

Logan leaned into the touch. He wanted more. More of these gentle touches, more of the pleasure Valen could give him. After the long years of isolation, he wanted more of this connection they shared.

Valen seemed to pick up on the thought, sending back feelings of reassurance. He pulled Logan close against his form, tentacles caressing his back soothingly as he began to strip Logan of the rest of his clothes. As he did so, Logan's muscles ached.

Valen had been right; he did need another dose of the nectar.

"I know," Valen said. "Don't worry. I won't let you suffer." He drew back just enough so he could offer Logan one of his tentacles to suck on. "Drink," he urged, pressing

the tip gently against Logan's mouth.

Logan opened his mouth and sucked on the offered tentacle, letting the silvery substance coat his mouth and tongue.

The effect on his system was nearly immediate. Heat flooded his body and his cock hardened almost painfully fast. His legs threatened to give out beneath him.

Valen caught him, supporting him easily with his many strong tentacles. He held Logan tightly against the warmth of his body, stroking his skin with his smooth appendages, soothing and arousing at once until Logan's mind went blank with pure desire and need.

He needed to be fucked so badly, he couldn't stand it. "Please."

"Everything you want," Valen promised. "I know exactly what you need."

Logan moaned as Valen lifted him and held him suspended in the air, one tentacle around each wrist and ankle, spreading him open for Valen's viewing pleasure. "Look how gorgeous you are like this," Valen said.

Logan whimpered. He could feel how much Valen desired him in that moment. Desire that only grew when Logan looked down at himself, his hard dick jutting upward and begging to be touched. But he knew it wouldn't be that easy.

That was the downside—and upside—of being with someone who knew all his dirtiest fantasies.

Valen would play with him a bit before giving him what he needed.

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Because that was exactly what Logan craved, deep down. To be teased and toyed with, to be driven mad with passion and pleasure. To be made to come so hard he forgot his own name.

To have the loneliness chased away by Valen's presence in his mind and body alike.

As if in reply, Valen tightened his hold on Logan just a little more, enough that Logan could feel the strength in those tentacles but not enough to hurt. Just enough to drive home the point that he was completely helpless in the face of Valen's alien desires—and his own.

Logan moaned, squirming a little just to feel those powerful coils squeeze around him, holding him steady. "You like that?" Valen murmured. He brushed his tentacle against Logan's lips, painting them with a shimmering trail of nectar before slipping it into his mouth.

The sweet taste filled his senses. There was some apprehension in the back of his mind, because he knew now what the stuff did to him, but he didn't need to be apprehensive now, did he?

Valen would take care of him.

The tentacle slipped deeper into his mouth and Logan relaxed around it. It felt strangely comforting, the way it stroked the roof of his mouth, the back of his throat, exploring gently. He could feel Valen's pleasure at his surrender through their shared connection.

Two smaller tentacles moved up Logan's thighs, caressing them lightly. They slid higher, stroking his ass and then his balls, playing with them teasingly. One wrapped firmly around his erection, pumping slowly.

Logan moaned around the tentacle still in his mouth, hips jerking instinctively to fuck that tight grip. The other tentacles tightened around him again, preventing further movement. He whimpered, struggling uselessly. His entire body burned with need.

Valen withdrew the tentacle from his mouth and Logan missed it instantly, needing it back. Valen chuckled and slipped two tentacles into Logan's mouth this time, sliding them along Logan's tongue, slowly fucking his mouth, stretching Logan's jaw wide.

"Is this what you want me to do to your hole?" Valen asked. "Stretch it open with my tentacles until you can hardly take any more?"

Logan couldn't speak around the appendages in his mouth, so he just whined his agreement instead, hoping that Valen would read how much he wanted to be stretched to his limits—and beyond.

His whole body ached with the lust that image stirred in him as Valen's tentacles continued to torment him, fucking his mouth, teasing his cock, caressing his skin, spreading his ass cheeks to expose his vulnerable hole, but never actually touching it. Logan's moans turned frantic.

He felt the brush of a slick tentacle against his entrance and cried out, arching against the hold on him, trying to force Valen to give him what he craved so badly.

But Valen didn't let him, holding firm until Logan finally relaxed in defeat once again, whimpering with frustration and the overwhelming sense of pleasure that washed over him at being owned so completely.

Valen's thoughts hummed with warm praise for him. "So perfect like this," he murmured aloud, his tone low and hungry. "My mate."

Then the tentacle was pressing against his opening again and this time, it breached him. Logan moaned loudly as the thin appendage slid inside his passage. It wasn't one of the bigger ones, but it was flexible enough to twist inside of him, rubbing its suction cups against Logan's prostate.

Logan shuddered violently at the sensation, pleasure shooting through him like lightning. He would have come right there if the tentacle around his cock hadn't tightened to prevent it.

Valen held still inside of him until Logan's trembling eased. Then he withdrew just far enough to add a second tentacle, twisting both of them deeper into Logan's body.

Logan writhed at this new intrusion, feeling deliciously full even as his greedy hole begged for more. He needed to be taken apart by those thick tentacles, to be stuffed full and fucked senseless.

Valen seemed to read his mind because a third slim tentacle pushed in alongside the other two, stretching Logan wider. He cried out around the two tentacles filling his mouth.

A thicker appendage wrapped around his waist as if to hold him more securely. It pressed against the small of his back, its suckers massaging the muscles there, easing the tension in Logan's body even as his hole clenched around the invading tentacles.

"Relax," Valen said softly, stroking Logan's skin with a free tentacle. "I've got you."

Logan forced himself to exhale and relax, willing his body to open up to Valen.

As soon as he did, another of the slim tentacles slid into him, pushing past the initial resistance of his sphincter.

The pressure on his insides was incredible, the fullness nearly unbearable, even though all of the tentacles were thin by themselves. There was something about having so many of them in him that made Logan's head go fuzzy.

Valen held him steady, stroking his sides gently, sending soothing thoughts across their connection. "You're doing well," Valen praised. "Just breathe."

The words were difficult to obey, but somehow he managed it, taking deep breaths through his nose. Except then the tentacles that held his ankles spread his legs farther apart, and he sank down, allowing the tentacles inside him deeper than any cock had ever gone before.

At the same time, the tentacles in his mouth slid down his throat, stealing his ability to think, to do anything but shudder at the image he must present, filled from both ends.

His cock throbbed pitifully.

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"Beautiful," Valen murmured, withdrawing enough to let him breathe. "Would you like to come? Or would you like me to hold you like this until the effects of my nectar wear off?"

Logan's thoughts swam. He couldn't answer the question because he wanted both.

Valen stroked his cheek, and then the tentacles inside him flexed slightly, rubbing against his inner walls and Logan lost awareness of anything else.

There were four of them.Four.

And they all moved individually.

They twisted and curled, exploring his insides with an eagerness that drove him absolutely insane. Each wriggle rubbed against his sensitive nerves, suction cups pulling at his rim and sliding against his prostate with every movement.

Logan's eyes were squeezed shut now as he gave himself entirely over to the sensation. His oversensitized body squirmed, tears ran down his cheek, his cock pulsed in Valen's tight grip, leaking precum, begging for release. But Valen only shifted his tentacles inside him again, making Logan sob with desperation.

It was perfect. Absolutely fucking perfect. Every one of Logan's most secret fantasies come true.

And then finally,finally, the tentacle around his cock relaxed, stroking him firmly in time with the thrusts of Valen's other tentacles. Logan screamed as he exploded,

coming harder than he ever had in his life while Valen's mental praise surrounded him like sunlight.

So beautiful, so perfect.

His body went limp, held up only by the tentacles wrapped around him as his consciousness floated somewhere above him. He could still feel Valen moving inside, drawing out his orgasm until he was utterly spent, every muscle in his body weak and pliant.

He felt himself drifting, exhaustion taking over now that the need had been sated. He barely registered Valen laying him gently down on the bed or curling protectively around him with multiple limbs. Logan sighed in contentment. He felt warm and safe in a way he hadn't in too long.

Sleep came quickly.

CHAPTER 8

When Valen awoke, Logan was sleeping next to him, his expression peaceful. Valen reached out and traced Logan's features gently. He'd enjoyed seeing Logan so blissed out, but the sight of his mate asleep in his arms filled Valen with an equally strong emotion. One that only mates could feel for one another.

He wished this moment could last forever.

His tentacles had wrapped protectively around Logan during the night, responding to his unconscious desire to keep his mate close and safe.

Logan wasn't who he had expected to be bound to, but he wasn't disappointed by this outcome, even if he did feel slightly guilty for eschewing his duty to his people. He'd

been sent into space to form an alliance with the Crystalline Empire.

He was helping no one by sleeping with a human from an underdeveloped civilization.

No one aside from himself.

Logan stirred slightly, and a certain tenderness for the human welled up inside Valen. No, he could not regret how this journey had turned out.

Logan's eyes fluttered open, still heavy with sleep. He blinked a few times, focusing on Valen's face. A small smile tugged at his lips, and Valen felt the warmth of that expression echo through their bond.

"Morning," Logan murmured, his voice rough with sleep. He didn't pull away from Valen's tentacles, which felt like another small victory.

"Good morning, mate," Valen replied softly, letting one tentacle stroke Logan's cheek. The human leaned into the touch. He hadn't put his guard back up after their recent coupling. Valen hoped he never would.

"I should make breakfast," Logan said, though he made no move to get up.

"I could help," Valen offered, though the memory of the meal he allegedly ruined still made him wince.

Logan seemed over it, however. He chuckled. "As long as you promise not to touch the microwave."

"I promise." Valen loosened his hold, allowing Logan to sit up. He watched as his mate pulled on a pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt, admiring the fluid way humans

moved on just two legs.

In the kitchen, Logan handled the cooking while Valen used his tentacles to set the table and pour drinks. The smell of coffee and eggs filled the cabin, and Valen found himself appreciating this simple Earth custom. Humanity might be primitive still, but there was something pleasant about Logan's quiet way of life.

Valen could get used to this.

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When they finally sat down to eat, though, Logan seemed lost in thought, pushing his eggs around the plate, and Valen could sense something weighing on his mind.

"Can I ask you something?" Logan said at last, setting down his fork.

"Anything," Valen replied.

Logan fixed his gaze on Valen. "What happens when your family comes for you?"

Honestly? Valen wasn't sure. His parents would not be pleased by the turn events had taken, but there would be little they could do. "They will have to understand that I've chosen you."

Logan searched Valen's face, not entirely convinced. "You mentioned before... about them maybe knowing a way to break the bond."

"I only said that because I thought it was what you wanted," Valen admitted. "When they arrive, they'll see it's too late for me to bond with anyone else. The connection between us is too strong now."

Logan's brow furrowed. "So what will you do? Stay on Earth? Take me into space?"

Valen reached across the table with one tentacle, gently brushing Logan's wrist. "I will do whatever my mate desires. That is my nature."

The words were meant to be reassuring, but he felt a flicker of uncertainty from Logan. His mate raised his cup of coffee to his lips, sipping slowly as if buying time

to process this.

"Would you like me to take you into space?" Valen asked softly.

"I don't know," Logan said. "What is it like? Your homeworld."

Valen thought for a moment. "It's... beautiful, but very different from Earth. The atmosphere is thicker, giving everything a purple hue. Our cities float in the air, held up by crystal formations that channel energy."

He paused, watching Logan's reaction. His mate's eyes had widened slightly, clearly trying to picture it.

"The buildings are alive," Valen continued, "growing and changing with the needs of the population. And at night, the three moons cast rainbow shadows through the crystal spires."

"It sounds incredible," Logan said, but Valen could sense his underlying concern. "Would I even be able to breathe there?"

"There are ways to adapt visitors," Valen assured him. "But..." He hesitated, not wanting to pressure Logan. "That's assuming you'd want to see it. We could stay here, on Earth. I find I'm growing quite fond of your forests and snow."

The corners of Logan's mouth twitched upward, but his expression remained thoughtful. "You'd really give up your floating cities to live in my cabin?"

"I would," Valen said, and meant it. One of his tentacles curled around Logan's free hand. "My home is wherever you are now."

Logan seemed to feel both warmth and guilt at that sentiment. "But you're a prince,"

he said. "Don't you have responsibilities?"

The question made Valen's tentacles twitch. Yes, he had responsibilities—ones he liked to avoid thinking about. For years, he'd known exactly who he was promised to.

But looking at Logan now, looking into those bright green eyes, Valen couldn't imagine bonding with anyone else.

"My only responsibility now is to you," he said firmly. "The rest will sort itself out."

Logan didn't look entirely convinced, but he didn't pull his hand away either.

Outside, snow had begun to fall again, adding to the sense of isolation that had become less a burden and more a blessing. Here, in this moment, no one and nothing would disturb them.

If only it could always be so.

The snow had finally stopped falling, leaving the world outside pristine and untouched. Logan stood at the window, the mug with his second coffee warming his hands, while Valen's tentacles curled loosely around his waist. They'd been cleaning up after breakfast when the clouds had parted, revealing a beautiful day, with the sun high in the sky in spite of the cold.

"Have you ever built a snowman?" Logan asked, surprising himself with the question. He couldn't remember the last time he'd built one himself. Probably that winter with Jeff, before... He pushed the thought away.

Valen's tentacles tightened slightly in response to Logan's emotional shift. "A man made of snow? Is this another Earth tradition?"

Logan found himself smiling at his mate's earnest curiosity. "Something like that. Want to learn?"

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The alien sounded enthusiastic. "Yes, please teach me."

Setting down his coffee, Logan pulled on his winter boots and coat. He hadn't planned on playing in the snow today, but sharing these simple Earth pleasures with Valen had become one of his favorite things.

"You don't need winter gear, do you?" Logan asked, looking at Valen.

"No. My body regulates temperature differently than yours. Even in this form I should be good for a while."

"If you're sure." Logan opened the door, and the crisp winter air rushed in as Logan stepped onto the porch, his boots crunching in the fresh powder. "First, we need to make three snowballs of different sizes. The biggest one forms the base." Hedemonstrated by scooping up a handful of snow and starting to pack it together.

Valen watched intently, then used his tentacles to gather snow. The perfectly spherical ball he created made Logan laugh.

"It doesn't need to be so... precise," Logan said. "Part of the charm is that it's a bit rough around the edges."

"Ah." Valen's topaz eyes sparkled. "Like humans."

Logan threw a handful of loose snow at him which passed right by Valen's head. "Very funny. Come on, help me roll this one bigger."

Valen took over the task eagerly, using his tentacles to push and roll the ball. The snow stuck perfectly, and soon they had a base that came up to Logan's waist.

"Now the middle section," Logan instructed, already starting the second ball. "This one needs to be smaller, but not too small."

He stopped as Valen's tentacles wrapped around his waist, pulling him back slightly. The unexpected touch sent a pleasant shiver down his spine.

"Your body temperature is dropping," Valen said, concern evident in his voice. "Perhaps we should continue this another time?"

"I'm fine," Logan assured him, placing his gloved hands over Valen's tentacles. "This is the most fun I've had in the snow in... well, in a long time."

Valen's tentacles squeezed gently before releasing him. "Then let's continue. Though I insist on providing warmth when needed."

They worked on the middle section together, Logan guiding while Valen's tentacles did most of the heavy lifting. The alien's precision made for an almost perfectly round snowball, though Logan noticed him deliberately adding a few imperfections, clearly trying to capture that human charm he'd mentioned.

"Now we lift this onto the base," Logan said, but before he could even think about how to do it, Valen's tentacles had already hoisted the section and placed it perfectly centered on top.

The head came together quickly, and soon they had three white spheres stacked in descending size. Logan gathered some stones from near the porch steps where the snow hadn't completely covered them.

"These are for the face," he explained, pressing them into the top sphere to form eyes and a smile. "Traditionally, we'd use a carrot for the nose, but I think we can improvise."

Valen's tentacles reached out, adjusting one of the stones slightly. "Why do humans make these temporary sculptures? They will melt."

Logan paused, considering. "I guess that's part of what makes them special. They're just for now, just for fun. Just because it's temporary doesn't mean it's not meaningful." He broke a few twigs from a nearby branch. "Here, help me give him arms."

As they worked on positioning the branches, Logan felt Valen's tentacles wrap around him again, this time radiating a gentle warmth that seeped through his coat. He leaned back into the touch, watching as their snowman took final shape.

"It's missing something," Valen observed.

"A hat," Logan agreed. "Wait here."

He hurried inside and returned with an old knit cap he'd found in the back of the closet. The dark blue wool was slightly faded, but it would do. He reached up and placed it on top of the snowman.

"Thank you," he said to Valen as they admired their work, "for doing this with me."

"I enjoy learning your customs," Valen replied. "Though I must admit, I'm more fascinated by the way they make you smile than the customs themselves."

Logan turned to face him, snow crunching under his boots. Valen's expression was so open, so full of genuine affection, that for a moment Logan forgot about everything

else, like the strangeness of their situation... or their uncertain future. He reached up to touch Valen's face, not caring that his gloves were still covered in snow.

That was when the first shadow passed overhead.

At first, Logan thought it was just clouds returning, but Valen's reaction told him otherwise. His mate's tentacles went rigid.

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"No," Valen whispered. "Not now."

Logan followed his gaze upward. Through the bare branches of the trees, he could make out two shapes moving across the sky: sleek, crystalline pods similar to Valen's but larger.

"Your family?" Logan asked, though he already knew the answer. His heart began to race, and he felt Valen's grip on him tighten protectively.

"Yes." Valen's voice was strained. "My parents. They're earlier than I expected."

The pods touched down in perfect unison, sending up a spray of snow, their crystalline hulls humming with energy. As the panels slid open, what emerged wasn't the tentacled form Logan had grown accustomed to with Valen. Instead, two swirling masses of pure energy—one a deep royal purple, the other an intense azure—floated from the pods.

Their snowman stood witness, its stone smile suddenly seeming mockingly cheerful as the peaceful winter morning dissolved into chaos. One of Valen's tentacles brushed against Logan's cheek, turning his face away from the sight and toward him instead.

"Whatever happens," Valen said, "remember that I choose you."

The energy beings circled around Valen, their lights pulsing in what Logan assumed was some form of communication. Valen himself let his physical form fall away and for a few seconds, they all seemed to merge into one bright, multicolored light.

Logan could only assume that this was their way of communicating.

Then, after another minute, the energy beings began to coalesce and transform. Unlike Valen's choice of tentacled form, the King and Queen of Nexa took on human appearances. Before Logan stood a distinguished older man with silver-streaked hair and a tall, elegant woman with features that somehow managed to look both beautiful and severe.

The King stepped forward first, his newly formed mouth turning down in displeasure as he regarded Logan. When he spoke, his voice carried the same alien quality as Valen's, but it seemed he had already learned English.

"So," he said, "this is what has become of our son's diplomatic mission."

The Queen's gaze swept over Logan, her expression unreadable. Unlike her husband, she hadn't spoken yet, but her presence felt no less intimidating.

Valen's tentacles wrapped around Logan as if wanting to protect him. "Perhaps we should continue this discussion inside," he said. "The cold affects humans differently than us."

The King's human features arranged themselves into a scowl. "You concern yourself with this primitive creature's comfort?"

"I concern myself with my mate's comfort," Valen replied, his tone firm but respectful. "As any proper Nexan would."

Something flickered across the Queen's face at that. Recognition, perhaps, or approval. She placed a delicate hand on her husband's arm. "The boy speaks wisely. We should observe their customs if we are to understand this... situation."

Logan felt a surge of gratitude through his bond with Valen. His alien prince's tentacles guided him toward the cabin, maintaining their protective embrace. The King and Queen followed, their movements unnaturally smooth, as if they were still more energy than matter.

"Please," Logan managed to say as they entered the cabin, gesturing to the couch and chairs. He wasn't prepared to host alien royalty. "Make yourselves comfortable."

The King and Queen exchanged a look before settling onto the couch with perfect posture. Their human forms seemed to shimmer slightly, glowing with the same light that Logan saw shine through under Valen's skin as well.

Valen, meanwhile, positioned himself between Logan and his parents. Logan sensed his determination, but also his anxiety. This wasn't going to be an easy conversation.

CHAPTER 9

The silence stretched uncomfortably until the Queen spoke, her voice more melodious than the King's. "Valen, you understand why we're here."

"I do, Mother." Valen's tentacles tightened around Logan. "And I'm glad you came for me, but circumstances have changed."

"Changed?" The King's human features twisted into something between disappointment and anger. "You had an unfortunate accident. That doesn't change anything. The alliance with Prince Seren's family has been in preparation for three cycles. Their child was meant to be your mate."

The Queen tried a more understanding tactic. "No one can blame you for what happened, son. The heat inducers in your system would have overwhelmed anyone's reasoning. That's their purpose."

Logan felt Valen tense against him. "Heat inducers?"

"A standard procedure," the King said dismissively. "Back in the old days, people let nature decide who to mate. These days we have the science to manufacture a mating bond. We use it to ensure compatibility between diplomatic matches."

Logan blinked. What did that mean?

The Queen looked at him. "Did Valen not tell you? He was injected before he was put into stasis for the journey. He was always meant to bond with the first person he saw upon waking up. That simply wasn't supposed to be you."

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The words hit Logan like a physical blow. He pulled away from Valen's tentacles, earning a distressed sound from his mate. "You were forced into this by drugs?"

"Logan—"

"Tell me," Logan demanded. "Did you sleep with me because you were drugged? Is it this drug that still makes you want to please me?"

The temperature in the room seemed to drop as Valen's parents exchanged a satisfied look, as if Logan's reaction confirmed something for them.

"Logan, please." Valen begged him with his eyes. "Let me explain."

"As regrettable as this situation is," the Queen interjected smoothly, "it can still be salvaged. The alliance must be preserved." She turned to address her son directly. "Valen, you understand your duty as third royal son. Sometimes we must make sacrifices for our people."

"The Crystalline prince's family will be understanding, given the circumstances," the King added. "It's not ideal, but with the proper apologies and compensation... these things have happened before. A marriage can proceed even without a true bond."

Logan felt sick. Every touch, every moment of intimacy with Valen... had it all been nothing but chemicals? His skin crawled at the memory of drinking Valen's nectar, of craving it, needing it.

He steeled himself. "None of this was real, was it?"

"Of course it's not real," the Queen said, her voice too gentle for the words she spoke. "The bond you feel was engineered for a greater purpose. I am very sorry you were dragged into this as a bystander. Valen should never have landed on your planet."

"But I did!" Valen spoke up. "And we bonded, no matter how that bond came to be, it's real now. Would you have me turn my back on that?"

His mother did not seem moved. "Would you turn your back on your people?"

"I can't leave Logan now," Valen argued. "Our mating is still young. He still relies on my nectar."

"I don't want it." Logan's voice cracked. "Not if it was all just... chemicals. Not if none of it was real."

"But it is real," Valen insisted, his tentacles reaching for Logan only to pull back when Logan flinched away. "Yes, the heat inducers were meant for someone else. Yes, they made me bond with the first compatible being I encountered. But everything that came after..."

"Was the result of those same chemicals," the King cut in. "You know this, Valen. The bond compels certain behaviors, certain feelings."

"The same would have been true with my intended mate," Valen argued. "You would have had me form an artificial bond with them, yet you call what Logan and I have fake?"

The Queen's perfect features arranged themselves into a sympathetic expression. "The difference, my son, is that one serves a greater purpose. What you've done here, taking a mate who didn't know what was happening from a non-spacefaring world... It's not right. You know that. You couldn't expect us not to correct that mistake."

"You can't correct my mistake!" Valen insisted.

Logan wrapped his arms around himself, trying to hold together the pieces that felt like they were falling apart. He should have known he would end up getting hurt again. "Stop. Just... stop. I won't be the reason you abandon your responsibilities. I won't drink your nectar again. I won't. If you have to go, just go."

Logan turned and walked away, leaving Valen with his parents. In his bedroom, he sank onto his bed, deflated, exhausted. Through the closed door, he could no longer hear their voices. They'd probably shifted to their natural forms to communicate.

The silence felt oppressive.

He stared at his hands, remembering how just an hour ago they'd been covered in snow, building a snowman with Valen. How could something that felt so real, so right, have started with a lie?

The door opened several minutes later. Logan didn't have to look up to know it was Valen.

Despite everything, they were still connected.

"Logan."

"Don't," Logan said softly. "Just... don't."

"I need you to understand," Valen said, moving closer but not touching Logan. "What happened that first night..."

"I don't want to talk about that night." Logan's hands clenched in his lap, even as he couldn't stop the memories from assaulting his mind. "I don't want to talk about any

of it."

"Logan, please?—"

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"Your parents are waiting." The words came out sharper than intended, but Logan couldn't do this. Not now, not ever. He'd really thought he was starting to feel something for this alien. He'd let him in. How could he have been so stupid? "You should go make arrangements for your... diplomatic marriage."

Valen's tentacles coiled tightly. "That's not what I want."

"What you want?" Logan laughed, the sound harsh even to his own ears. "According to your parents, what you want is artificial. Caused by drugs designed for someone else."

"It's not like that."

"Isn't it?" Logan stood up, needing to move, to put space between them. His chest felt too tight. "Because from where I'm standing, it seems like you knew exactly what those chemicals would do. You knew they'd make you bond with the first person you saw, and you just... what? Decided not to mention it?"

"I couldn't..." Valen cast his gaze aside, as if admitting this pained him. "By the time I could think clearly enough to explain, we were already..."

"Already what? Mated? Bonded? Pretty words for something that was engineered in a lab." He got up and paced, needing to move to sort his thoughts. He looked out the window at the snowman. Such a stupid thing to have been doing. "You were supposed to meet someone else. Bond with them. Instead, you crashed here and... what? I was just convenient?"

"No!" Valen burst out. "When I saw you, I felt so lucky."

Logan whirled around to him. "But that feeling was never real. It was just... chemicals. Programming. Whatever you want to call it."

"Then why does it hurt so much?" Valen demanded. "If it's not real, why can I feel your pain like it's my own?"

Logan shook his head "Because that's what the drugs do, isn't it? Make us think we feel things we don't?"

Behind him, Valen made a sound of frustration. "You're not listening."

"I'm listening just fine." Logan closed his eyes. He had to make Valen stop. Had to make him see reason, before... before what? Before Logan got too attached? Before he let himself believe this could last? "Go back to your parents. Go meet your intended mate. Just... go."

If Logan was going to be left again, he didn't want to draw this out. He wanted to rip the bandaid off.

"And what of you?" Valen searched his face. "I can't let you go through withdrawal."

"I'll survive."

"The fever alone will be awful."

"I said I'll survive!" Logan's voice cracked. He turned his back to Valen, unable to look at him. "Just... please. Leave."

"No." The word hung in the air between them. "I won't let you suffer just because you

think what we have isn't real."

Logan's laugh was bitter. "I don't think that. I know that."

"Stop." Frustration seeped into Valen's voice. "Stop acting like you know what I feel. You don't understand at all."

Logan made himself face the alien. "What do I not understand?"

Valen was silent for a long moment. When he spoke again, his voice was softer.

"Let me show you."

"What?"

"Let me show you what I really feel." Valen moved closer, a note of eager desperation in his voice. "Open your mind to mine. Completely."

Logan took a step back, his shoulder blades pressing against the cold window. "No."

"Why not?"

"Because..." Logan swallowed hard. Because it would hurt too much. Because if he let Valen in that deeply, losing him would destroy whatever was left of Logan's heart. "Because it won't change anything. You still have to go."

"If you truly believe that after seeing my truth, I'll go." Valen's tentacles reached for him but stopped just short of touching. "But at least give me a chance. Your human words are insufficient."

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Logan stared at the space between them, at Valen's tentacles hovering just inches from his skin. There was something tempting about the offer, but also something terrifying. What might Valen see in him if Logan held nothing back? Would he see that Logan was only half a person now? That he'd jumped at all the warmth Valen had offered because he'd been too fucking lonely for too fucking long?

"What are you afraid of?" Valen asked.

"I'm not..." Logan trailed off. What was the point of lying when Valen could probably feel his fear through their bond anyway? "You'll see too much."

"I want us both to see everything," Valen said gently. "Complete honesty. No more barriers."

Logan wrapped his arms around himself. "Your parents are waiting."

"Let them wait."

Logan closed his eyes, conflicted. If he let Valen in... "What if... What if what you see in my head makes you want to leave even more?"

"That won't happen."

"You don't know that." Logan's voice trembled. "You don't know what's in my head. How broken I am. How much I—" He cut himself off, but the words hung in the air between them anyway. How much I need you.

One of Valen's tentacles gently brushed his cheek. "Then show me. Show me everything you're so afraid of me seeing."

Slowly, Logan opened his eyes, meeting Valen's topaz gaze.

"I know you're scared," Valen said. "I can feel it. But you're pushing me away because you think I'll leave, while I'm trying to show you why I won't."

"Your parents?—"

"Are not the ones bonded to you." Valen moved closer. "Let me show you what that really means. Not just what you think you know about our bond, but everything. Please."

Logan felt his resistance crumbling. He wanted so badly for Valen to prove him wrong.

"Okay." The word came out barely a whisper. Logan took a shuddering breath. "Okay."

Valen's tentacle moved up higher to touch his temple. "Are you sure?"

Logan almost laughed at that. No, he wasn't sure at all. But he was tired of being afraid. Tired of pushing away the one thing that had made him feel whole again. "Just... do it before I change my mind."

"Close your eyes," Valen murmured.

Logan let his eyes fall shut, feeling the gentle pressure of Valen's tentacle against his temple. For a moment, nothing happened. Then something warm spread through his mind, like sunlight breaking through clouds.

The sensation was nothing like their previous mental touches. Those had been surface-level, mere ripples compared to this tidal wave. Logan gasped as Valen's consciousness flowed into his mind, bringing with it a kaleidoscope of emotions and memories.

He saw himself through Valen's eyes that first night, not just a convenient accident, but a bright spot of wonder in the cold darkness after the crash. Felt Valen's wonder at their first real conversation, his growing fascination with Logan's quiet strength. The heat inducers might have created the initial attraction, but they hadn't created the way Valen ached every time Logan pulled away, hadn't manufactured the joy he felt at each small smile Logan gave him.

But more than that, he felt Valen's fear—fear of failing his people, yes, but overwhelmed by a deeper terror of losing Logan. Of watching him suffer through withdrawal. Of returning to that cold, empty space that existed before their bond.

This is what I feel, Valen's thoughts whispered through him. This is what's real.

Logan trembled under the weight of it all, his own mental walls crumbling. Everything he'd been holding back came rushing out. The crushing loneliness after Jeff's death, the way Valen's presence had started filling those empty spaces, and the paralyzing fear that he'd be left alone again.

I don't know how to let you go, Logan's thoughts confessed before he could stop them. I don't want to.

Valen's response came not in words but in a surge of fierce protectiveness, a determination that burned like starfire. Images flashed between them: Valen standing up to his parents, Logan by his side; the two of them finding a way forward together, whether on Earth or among the stars.

You won't have to be alone, Valen promised. I choose you. I will always choose you.

Logan's knees buckled under the weight of Valen's certainty, but the alien's tentacles held him steady. Physical touch grounded him as their minds remained entwined, sharing every fear, every hope, every truth they'd been too afraid to voice.

But your people... Logan's doubt crept in.

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Will understand, Valen's thoughts interrupted. Or they won't. But I won't sacrifice what we have for political convenience.

Through their connection, Logan felt the truth of it. Felt how Valen's duty to his people paled in comparison to the bond they shared. Not just the chemical connection that had started it all, but everything that had grown from that beginning, everything that was still growing between them.

The warmth of their shared consciousness enveloped them both, until Logan felt something change. A creeping coldness spread through their connection, like poison in his veins.

Was that his own doubt manifesting again?

No.

Alarm spiked through Valen, and so it also spiked through Logan.

Something's wrong, Valen's thoughts came urgently. Logan, something's?—

The cold intensified, driving into Logan's mind like needles of ice. He tried to pull away, but he couldn't move, couldn't even open his eyes.

What was this?

What was going on?

Father, no!Valen's mental voice rang with horror.What are you doing?

The King's presence manifested in their shared consciousness, vast and ancient and cold as deep space.What must be done. The bond can only be severed by death.

No! No! Logan felt his thoughts beginning to numb, memories growing distant and unreachable. Jeff's face. His parents. The snowman he'd built with Valen.

Get out!Valen's consciousness wrapped around Logan's, trying to shield him. It felt warm. Not warm enough.You can't do this!

I can, and I must, the King's thoughts came with implacable certainty.For our people. For the alliance.

The cold pressed deeper. Logan couldn't breathe, couldn't think. His heart was slowing, each beat more labored than the last. He felt Valen's panic, his desperate attempt to fight back against his father's power, but the King was too strong.

Logan!Valen's thoughts were frantic.Stay with me. Focus on my voice.

But the cold was everywhere now, seeping into every corner of Logan's mind. He was fading, falling into that crushing darkness.

Through their connection, he felt Valen's desperation turn to rage. Raw, primal fury that burned through their shared consciousness like a solar flare.

You will not take him from me!

Valen's mind surged against his father's presence, no longer defensive but attacking. All his life, Logan suddenly knew, he'd been the obedient son, accepting his father's power, his authority. But not now. Not with Logan's life slipping away.

The King's surprise rippled through their connection. You dare!

I dare, Valen's thoughts thundered. Get. Out. Of. His. Head.

Each word came with a mental blow that drove his father back. The King's power faltered, his iron grip on Logan's mind beginning to crack. Logan felt Valen's strength flowing through him, pushing back the killing cold.

You are not strong enough, the King snarled, but there was uncertainty in his mental voice now.

I am strong enough to protect what's mine, Valen's consciousness blazed brighter. You taught me that, Father. You taught me that a ruler protects what belongs to them. Logan is MINE.

With a final surge of power that felt like it might shatter Logan's skull, Valen drove his father out of their connection. The King's human form staggered backward, blood streaming from his nose, his perfect features twisted in shock and pain.

Logan collapsed to his knees, gasping for air. Valen's tentacles held him close, both of them shaking from the aftermath of the mental battle. Blood dripped from Valen's nose, iridescent and bright.

"Impossible," the King whispered, pressing one hand to his temple. "You were never this strong."

"I never had something worth fighting for," Valen's voice was raw, dangerous. "If you ever try to harm him again, I will not show mercy. Not even to you, Father, and then I will tell every family in the alliance how the great King tried to murder his own son's mate. How's that for diplomatic relations?"

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The Queen's cool voice cut through the tension. "I warned you not to attempt this." She moved to support the King, who was still pressing his hand to his temple. "We might have convinced our son to live up to his duty, but now, thanks to your actions, we never will."

The King tried to speak, but she silenced him with a look. "Enough. You've done more than enough." To Valen, she added, "I will take your father back to his ship."

Her perfect features betrayed no emotion as she guided the King out, but the temperature in the room seemed to warm slightly with their departure.

CHAPTER 10

As soon as his parents left, Valen thought he was going to collapse with the receding adrenaline. He could barely hold Logan upright, but he refused to let go. He'd come too close to losing everything, to losing Logan.

His mate's skin felt cold against his tentacles, too cold. His mate was shaking, breath coming in short gasps.

"Logan?" Valen held him closer. "Are you...can you...?" He couldn't even form the words. The memory of his father's psychic assault, of feeling Logan's consciousness starting to fade, made his tentacles coil tighter.

Logan's hand came up to touch one of Valen's tentacles. The simple gesture sent relief coursing through their bond. He was alive. He was here.

"That was..." Logan's voice was hoarse. "Your father tried to..."

"I'm sorry," Valen whispered. "I'm so sorry. I never thought he would." He broke off, rage and guilt warring inside him. "I should have protected you better. Should have known he might..."

Logan's other hand reached up to touch Valen's face, fingers brushing away the iridescent blood still trickling from his nose. "You did protect me. You fought him."

The awe in Logan's voice made Valen's hearts clench. "I've never defied him like that before. Never even knew I could." He helped Logan to his feet, supporting him when his legs wobbled. "But when I felt you slipping away..."

He guided Logan to sit on the bed, still unwilling to break contact. Every beat of Logan's heart, every breath, reassured him that the worst hadn't happened.

"You should rest," Valen said, noticing how Logan's hands still trembled. "That kind of psychic assault... it takes a toll."

Logan shook his head. "I can still feel you in my head. More than before." His eyes met Valen's, full of questions. "What you showed me, before your father..."

"All of that was true." Valen's tentacles curled around Logan's wrists, seeking his pulse points. "The heat inducers might have started this, but they couldn't have given me the strength to defy my father. You did that."

"You chose me." Logan's voice was quiet, wondering. "Over everything."

"Yes." The word came out fierce, certain. Valen touched his forehead to Logan's, their bond humming with shared emotion. "And I would do it again."

He felt Logan's lingering doubts through their connection, saw flashes of memory. Jeff's death, years of loneliness, the fear of being left behind again. But underneath that was something warm and bright, growing stronger.

"When your father was... when he tried to..." Logan swallowed hard. "You were furious."

"He tried to take you from me." Valen's tentacles tightened possessively. "No one gets to do that. Not my father, not the alliance, no one."

A soft knock at the door made them both tense. The Queen stood in the doorway, looking composed despite everything that had happened.

"Your father is resting in his pod," she said, her voice neutral. "I would like to speak with you both, if you're able."

Valen's tentacles tightened protectively around Logan. After what his father had tried, he wasn't about to let anyone near his mate. "I'm not leaving Logan."

"I assure you, Valen, I have no intention of forcing you now," the Queen said, remaining in the doorway. "What your father attempted was..." She paused, choosing her words carefully. "Unconscionable."

Logan's pulse still raced under Valen's tentacles, but he straightened slightly. "Why are you here?"

"Because we need to discuss what happens next. Your bond," she gestured between them, "is clearly too strong to be severed."

The Queen stepped further into the room but maintained her distance, seeming to understand Valen's protective stance.

"The alliance with Prince Seren's family..." she began.

"I won't—" Valen started, but his mother held up a hand.

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"Let me finish, my son. The alliance is important, yes, but what your father tried to do..." She shook her head, her perfect features showing the first crack of emotion. "To kill an innocent being, to destroy a true bond... It goes against everything our people stand for."

Logan shifted slightly in Valen's embrace. "But you were willing to try to separate us before."

"Through persuasion, yes. Through showing Valen his duty." The Queen's gaze settled on her son. "But what I saw today... The power you wielded to protect your mate. That kind of strength only comes from a genuine bond."

Valen felt Logan's surprise through their connection. His own tentacles relaxed slightly, though he maintained his protective hold.

"So what happens now?" Valen asked, his voice still carrying an edge of defiance.

"Now," the Queen said, "we find another way. The alliance is still necessary, but perhaps..." She paused, considering. "Perhaps, we've been too rigid in our thinking. Your brother Kix has expressed interest in diplomatic service..."

Valen looked at his mother in surprise. "Kix? But he's only just completed his transformation cycles."

"He's of age," the Queen pointed out. "And unlike you, he's shown genuine interest in leaving the planet."

"I didn't know that."

"You were... occupied with your own preparations at the time." The Queen's lips curved in what might have been a smile. "Of course, such arrangements take time. We would need to offer Prince Seren's family something in the interim to maintain good faith."

"Like what?" Logan asked, tensing.

"Access to some of our outer crystal fields, perhaps." The Queen's perfect features took on a thoughtful cast. "It's not ideal, but after today's... incident, we need to find a way to manage." She fixed her gaze on Valen. "Understand that no one can know what you've done here. Taking a primitive mate instead of your intended..." She shook her head. "No. The universe must think your accident was fatal."

"You want to tell everyone I'm dead?" Valen had known there would be consequences to choosing Logan, but this...

"It's the cleanest solution," his mother said. "Prince Seren's family won't be pleased, of course, but they cannot object to an accident. And it will give us time to arrange... other possibilities."

Logan's hand found one of Valen's tentacles, squeezing gently. The touch helped steady him, even as his mind raced through the implications. No more royal duties. No more diplomatic obligations. Just him and Logan and whatever life they chose to build.

But also no visits home. No more family gatherings.

"What are you going to tell my siblings? You can't hide the truth from family. That is not our way."

His mother's features hardened slightly. "They will know the truth. The only truth that matters..." Her gaze swept over them both, "Which is that they can never see you again."

There was finality in her words. Through their bond, Valen felt Logan's surge of guilt and quickly sent back reassurance. This wasn't Logan's fault. This was his choice, his defiance, his... freedom.

"Valen." His mother's voice came out softer now. "May I speak with you alone? Just for a moment?"

Valen felt Logan's immediate tension through their bond, but his mate's voice was steady. "I'll wait in the kitchen." Before Logan could move, Valen caught his hand, sending a pulse of reassurance through their connection. Safety. Love. Trust.

As soon as Logan left, his mother's human form dissolved into pure light, her familiar energy pattern swirling in the light of the sun that shone into the room. Valen hesitated only a moment before letting his own form shift, his consciousness expanding as his physical constraints fell away.

His mother's essence reached for his. It was not an invasion like his father's attack had been, but the gentle mingling he remembered from his childhood. Love flowed between them, tinged with sorrow and pride and the cautious hope for mutual success and happiness. In this form, there could be no lies.

My brave, foolish child, her energy pulsed. You've grown so strong.

I'll miss you, he sent back, letting her feel the depth of his grief at their separation, but also his absolute certainty about his choice. Give everyone my love.

They'll have it always. Her energy wrapped around his in a final embrace. Be happy,

my son. Be free.

Her light faded from the room like mist in the morning sun, leaving Valen alone with the lingering warmth of her farewell. He remained in his energy form a moment longer, processing the finality of what had just happened.

Then he heard the sounds of his parents' pods taking off.

They were gone.

The door to the room creaked open slowly, cautiously.

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"Valen?" Logan's voice was concerned. Through their connection, Valen could feel his mate's desire to help warring with uncertainty about whether to approach.

Valen shifted back to his physical form, and Logan crossed the room immediately, reaching for him. The simple touch of his mate's hand against his skin anchored him, helped him remember that he'd made the right choice.

"They're really gone," Valen said, his voice rougher than usual. "My mother, she..." He trailed off, struggling to explain the depth of what had passed between them in their energy forms. "She wanted me to know she understands. That she loves me, even though I can never go home again."

Logan's arms tightened around him, and Valen sensed his mate's complex mix of emotions: guilt at being the cause of this separation, fierce pride in Valen's choice, and underneath it all, a deep, steady love only for him.

It was worth every sacrifice.

"I'm sorry," Logan whispered against his skin. "I know how much you're giving up."

"No." Valen cupped Logan's face. "Don't apologize. I don't regret this." He pressed their foreheads together, letting Logan feel the truth of his words through their bond. "My mother saw our bond, saw what my father tried to do, and she..." He took a shaky breath. "She blessed us, in her way. Gave us her permission to be free."

"I'm glad," Logan said.

"Me too." Valen guided Logan to the bed. "Let us rest for a moment."

They were both exhausted, from the psychic and the emotional battles they'd fought.

Valen looked out the window as he lay down, at the planet that was to be his new home.

It wasn't the ending he'd expected when he'd left home to meet his mate, but as he felt Logan's warmth against him, their bond humming with contentment despite their exhaustion, he knew it was the best thing he could possibly have found among the stars.

CHAPTER 11

CHRISTMAS MORNING

Logan's fingers fidgeted with the stack of paper in his hands as he watched Valen clear away their breakfast dishes. It still amazed him how quickly his alien mate had adapted to domestic tasks. Soon they'd be leaving the cabin, heading back to his life in the city, and everything would change again.

"I, uh, made you something," Logan said, his voice catching slightly. "For Christmas."

Valen turned. "But I don't have anything for you."

"It's okay. I want you to have this." Logan held out the stack of hand-made coupons, bound together with twine he'd found in a kitchen drawer. "They're... promises. For when we start our life in the city."

Valen drifted closer, tentacles reaching for the small booklet. His topaz eyes widened

as he read the first coupon—he'd learned to read extremely fast. "One guided tour of downtown, including your first coffee shop experience." He flipped to the next one. "Movie night at a real theater." His gaze met Logan's. "You made a list of things to show me?"

"Things I want to share with you," Logan admitted. "But also things you'll need to know, for when we..." He swallowed, excitement and anxiety mixing in his chest. "For our future together."

"It'll be amazing." Valen's joy lit up everything inside of Logan. "I can't wait to see your city. Tell me again what you do there."

"Well," Logan said, amused, "I work at the university library. It's quiet most days, helping students find research materials, organizing the collections." He smiled. "You'll love it there. Whole floors of books, old manuscripts, digital archives of human knowledge..."

"I love it already." His accent sounded more natural now. "And you live..."

"In an apartment not far from campus. Nothing fancy, but it has big windows and a small balcony." Logan's hand found one of Valen's tentacles, squeezing gently. "We'll need to be careful, of course. You'll need a human form when we're out in public."

Valen's grinned. "Maybe that can be my gift to you. I'll let you choose."

The eagerness in Valen's voice made Logan's chest warm. Here was this alien prince, willing to change his entire form just to fit into Logan's world. Just to be with him.

Valen turned on the TV. The morning news flickered to life, showing a polished anchor with perfect hair delivering headlines about winter storms.

Without hesitation, Valen shifted, and Logan found himself standing next to an exact copy of the newscaster.

"Too noticeable," Logan said quickly. "We don't want anyone recognizing you from TV."

Valen changed back to his natural form with a ripple of energy, already flipping to another channel. A cooking show, featuring a celebrity chef with spiky blonde hair and intense expressions. Another shift, and that man stood beside Logan instead.

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"That's, uh... that's Gordon Ramsay. Hot, but definitely not the best choice for blending in."

Valen hummed thoughtfully and kept surfing channels, pausing briefly on each to study the humans he saw. A weather reporter. A sitcom actor. A car commercial spokesman. With each new channel, he tried on a new form, like someone browsing through clothes at a store.

Logan found himself both fascinated and slightly unnerved watching his mate try on different human appearances so easily. It was strange seeing familiar and unfamiliar faces appear where Valen stood, but through their connection, he could still feel his mate's essence. Valen was curious, eager to learn, wanting to get this right.

"Wait," Valen said, pausing on a channel showing some kind of medical drama. "I like his eyes." He shifted, taking on the actor's warm brown eyes but combined it with the previous channel's news anchor's stronger jawline. "And maybe..." He flipped again, landing on a coffee commercial. The man in it had thick dark hair that fell slightly over his forehead. Another shift, and that hair appeared on his emerging composite face.

Logan watched, fascinated, as Valen created something entirely new.

But then Valen stopped and looked at Logan.

"What do you prefer?" Valen asked, and Logan felt his sincere desire to please, to find a form his mate would want to look at every day.

"I..." Logan hesitated, warmth spreading across his cheeks. "I like you in any form. You're still you."

"Logan." Valen brushed his arm gently. "You're allowed to have preferences." He gestured at the TV. "What appeals to you?"

Logan looked at the screen, then back at Valen's current borrowed features. "Well... I do like those eyes. But maybe a bit lighter? More amber than brown?" He watched as Valen adjusted the color, making them warmer, with hints of gold that reminded Logan of his natural topaz pupils. "Yes, like that. And maybe..." Logan leaned forward as Valen flipped to another channel, pointing at an actor in a commercial. "That nose? It's distinctive but not too much."

Valen made the adjustment, and Logan felt his mate's pleasure at his growing involvement. The nose did suit the face they were building, adding character to the classical features.

"What about the mouth?" Valen asked, switching channels again. He paused on each face they saw, letting Logan study them.

"That one," Logan said, surprising himself with his certainty. The man on screen had a gentle smile, the kind that started in one corner and seemed to hold secrets. "It's... expressive. Like you."

Valen incorporated it, then turned to Logan with that same smile, somehow both borrowed and entirely his own. Through their bond, Logan felt a spark of excitement. They were getting closer.

"The hair's still not quite right," Logan mused, more confident now. He watched as Valen flipped through channels, both of them searching. "There!" A character in some period drama had appeared, his dark hair falling in soft waves, longer than

current fashion but not excessively so. "That style, but maybe a shade darker?"

Valen made the changes, and suddenly Logan's breath caught. The separate features they'd chosen had merged into something... someone... who looked both completely human and uniquely Valen. Those warm gold-flecked eyes, the secret smile, the dramatic sweep of nearly black hair... it all came together into a face that Logan could easily imagine walking beside him through the city streets, sitting across from him in coffee shops, drawing subtle second glances but not unwanted attention.

Through their bond, he felt Valen's own recognition. He liked this too.

Valen looked down at himself, flexing his fingers. "This is strange," he said. "Only two hands. How do you deal?"

Logan laughed. "Two hands are plenty."

Valen held one of those hands out to him. "Come here."

Logan's heart beat fast as he obliged and took the offered hand. It felt warm and solid. Human. But this man was still the alien he knew, radiating the same affection, the same desire to be close, even if his physical form had changed.

Logan reached up, letting his fingers trace the strong line of Valen's jaw, the soft curve of his mouth. "I like those lips."

""You do?" Valen smiled. "Then I shall keep them." He leaned closer and brushed those lips over Logan's own. "You like this too?"

Warmth sparked inside of Logan at the soft kiss. "Definitely."

He let himself be pulled against the newly transformed body, enjoying the sensation

of Valen wrapping his arms around him. It was different, but not in a bad way. Just new.

His fingers touched the soft fabric of the sweater Valen was wearing. "What is this made of?" he asked.

"Part of my body," Valen said. "I can make it disappear." The next moment, Logan's fingers were touching naked skin—and muscles. Naturally Valen had given himself a six-pack like he'd seen on the athletes on TV.

"You're cheating." Logan laughed again.

"Do you not like it?"

"No, I love it." He traced the lines of those abs with his finger tips, enjoying the shudder that ran through Valen's body at the light touch. "We'll have to get you some actual clothes in the city."

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"Clothes are overrated," Valen murmured, kissing his neck. "I like you better without them, too." As Valen spoke, his hands slipped under Logan's sweater, touching bare skin. "It feels nice under my fingertips."

"See? Hands aren't so bad." Logan smiled, glancing down Valen's body. He was wearing jeans. Not real jeans, of course. "What did you choose for downstairs?" Valen hadn't seen a lot of human dick, had he?

Valen smiled back at him. "I think a tool like that is better demonstrated in action."

He pulled Logan toward the bedroom and then onto the bed, covering Logan's body with his own. Their mouths found each other and kissed deeply as their legs tangled together. Logan sighed into the kiss, loving that sensation of another male body on top of his, hard lines digging into his own. It scratched an itch in him he hadn't realized was there until now. As much as he loved Valen in his tentacled form, this right here, skin on skin, fulfilled a much more basic need of his that he had ignored for too long.

Valen seemed to be enjoying himself as well, if the way he ground their bodies together meant anything. Whatever he had in his pants was growing hard as well, rubbing against Logan's own cock through layers of clothes.

Logan groaned. He needed those clothes out of the way, needed to feel Valen fully against his naked skin.

Valen seemed to pick up on his impatience because his jeans disappeared just like his sweater had, revealing a nice hard cock that made Logan's mouth water with want. It

was thick and curved upward slightly, looking absolutely perfect as far as Logan was concerned.

"What do you think?" Valen asked as Logan reached out to stroke him. "Did I get it right?" He gasped at the touch and thrust into Logan's hand.

"Oh yes," Logan assured him, squeezing gently, enjoying the feel of it. "Where did you get your inspiration for this? You didn't see dick on TV, did you?"

"Not TV," Valen admitted. "I looked on your phone when you were sleeping last night. You have a very revealing search history."

Logan stared at Valen. "You went through my phone?"

"I only looked at your porn. Was that wrong?"

Logan stared at his alien mate a moment longer. "I'll forgive you if you put the knowledge you gained to good use," he muttered.

Valen grinned. "Gladly."

His hands found the button of Logan's jeans, popping it open with ease before pulling the zipper down slowly. Logan lifted his hips so Valen could pull the offending piece of fabric off, taking Logan's underwear along with it, leaving him naked beneath Valen's gaze. "Your cock is very nice too."

Logan's skin heated. "It's fairly regular." Even as he said it, though, his cock seemed to stand up more proudly under Valen's praise.

"No, it's very nice," Valen insisted, amber eyes holding Logan's gaze. "It's attached to you, and it makes you react so beautifully when I touch it." As if to give weight to his

words, one hand closed over Logan's erection and began stroking it, making it jump in his fist as Logan let out a soft moan. Valen's lips twitched. "See?"

Logan huffed out a breathless laugh. "Okay, okay. You win. My cock is very nice."

Valen hummed his approval, bending forward to press a kiss to Logan's lips. At the same time, his thumb brushed over the slit in Logan's tip. Logan moaned into his mouth, pleasure sparking hotly through his veins, chasing the blood south and filling his erection completely.

When the kiss broke, Logan's breath was coming faster, need burning through his body once again. He reached for his partner, running his hands over Valen's chest, marveling at the smoothness of the skin, the firmness of the muscles under his palms. It all felt so warm and real.

His hand slid down to Valen's cock. The one he'd chosen to please Logan. It felt heavy in his hand, just as it should. "Fuck me with this," he whispered against Valen's lips.

"I will," Valen breathed, kissing him again before shifting to kneel between Logan's thighs. Logan spread for him, watching as his alien lover stroked himself with one hand and reached out to tease his rim with the fingers of the other.

The first push of two fingers had Logan moaning. His fingers had become slick without lube, easing their way inside him. "You're always tight," Valen murmured, "no matter how much I stretched you last time." He pressed a kiss to Logan's thigh. "I love that about your human body. Because I know how much you love it."

Logan shivered at Valen's words and his tone of voice as his fingers pushed deeper. He couldn't wait to feel that thick cock inside him, fucking deep into him.

Somehow, he wanted it even more than he'd wanted the tentacles, which was saying something.

Valen looked at him as if the thought registered with him, or maybe the desire did. "You'll have me," he promised. "Any way you want. I will always try to make you happy as best as I can."

"You make me very happy."

"Good." Valen added a third finger, twisting it inside Logan's passage and making him cry out at the stretch. His body burned, but he welcomed the pain, wanting Valen inside him more than anything else.

Finally, those fingers slipped free. Logan watched as Valen stroked himself once more and positioned the tip of his erection against his entrance. Then, he pressed forward, breaching his hole, pushing inside. Logan moaned, his back arching as he opened for Valen, taking every inch of that cock deep into his body. "God, yes, that's good..."

"You feel perfect around me," Valen murmured, bending down to press a kiss to Logan's lips. Logan sighed, opening up eagerly to the kiss, letting the sensations overwhelm him. He could feel Valen everywhere: on top of him, in his head, in his ass, stretching and filling him. He loved the sensation of being pinned down by Valen's weight, surrounded by him completely, skin on skin. He let his thoughts drift, and felt Valen there too. Felt his joy at pleasing Logan, his desire to fuck him, his lust, his love. So much love it made Logan dizzy.

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He wrapped his thighs around Valen's hips and dug his heels into his lower back, urging him deeper, needing to feel all that cock buried inside him completely. Valen moaned, breaking their kiss to stare down at him. "Logan..." He pulled his hips back until his tip was the only thing left inside Logan before thrusting in again.

Logan cried out at the sudden movement, but the pleasure was so intense he couldn't help it.

"Is it good?" Valen whispered.

Was it good? It was incredible. "Yes," Logan said. "Yes, fuck me. Fuck me hard."

Valen moaned and began moving faster, driving into him harder with each stroke until Logan could no longer speak, only pant for breath as the pleasure built higher and higher inside him, burning him from the inside out.

He wanted Valen deeper, wanted all of him. He clung tightly to Valen's shoulders, trying to pull him closer, to take every inch of his lover's cock.

Valen growled softly and grabbed hold of Logan's hips, pulling them up until Logan's ass lifted off the bed entirely and Valen was able to slam into him at the perfect angle that had stars erupting behind Logan's eyelids with each thrust. His prostate throbbed with every hit, his cock leaking against his belly as his climax approached.

"Please, please, please," he chanted, desperate for release. He needed more, needed...

Valen slammed into him again and held. Logan whimpered desperately until Valen's

cock swelled inside him, growing larger than it had been before, stretching his hole wider and pressing against his prostate relentlessly until Logan's vision blurred. His whole existence focused on that one point of contact, and when Valen finally moved again, his too thick cock sliding against Logan's prostate as it tugged his rim open, Logan came untouched. Pleasure crashed through his system, doubled by the pleasure of Valen's climax, pulsing hotly inside him as Valen emptied himself. Logan's cock jerked and spurted cum over his stomach as he rode out the aftershocks, gasping and clinging to his mate as Valen collapsed against him. He was shaking too, breathing harshly in Logan's ear.

After a few moments, he shifted, carefully slipping out of Logan's body before rolling them both onto their sides so they lay facing each other, foreheads almost touching. "How was that? Good enough without the tentacles?"

Logan gave a shaky laugh. His brain felt fuzzy around the edges, his mind still buzzing in the afterglow of their shared release. "I like the tentacles," he said. "But they're just a kink. This was... something else." He traced his fingers over the softskin of Valen's cheek and smiled contentedly. "I like you like this."

Valen smiled back at him. "So no more tentacles?"

Logan chuckled and shook his head. "I didn't say that."

Valen pulled him against his chest and gave him another brief kiss. "I can be anything for you, any time. Any fantasy of yours, I'm happy to fulfill."

Logan sighed happily, relaxing against his mate. "You're already doing that."

"By lying in bed with you?"

"By being you," Logan corrected. "By being here with me on Christmas, by..." Logan licked his lips and gazed up at Valen. "By loving me."

"I do love you." Valen stroked his hand down Logan's back tenderly. "More than anything."

Logan nuzzled closer, feeling warm and sated and happy in a way he'd thought he'd never be again. "I love you too." He kissed Valen's skin. "Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas." Valen tightened his arms around him, and they remained like that for a very long time, lost in each other, having a very merry Christmas indeed.