

author of Ice Planet Barbarians

RUBY DIXON



SLICE OF
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STORIES

ICE ICE

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ICE ICE BABIES

ICE PLANET BARBARIANS: A SLICE OF LIFE

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PART I

ICE ICE BABIES

NORA

Even in my sleep, there's a baby crying. I mumble something and roll over, determined to shut out the noise.

A hand pats my shoulder. "I will get the kit. You sleep."

Dagesh. I blink awake as my mate rolls out of the furs and pads across the cave to the squalling baby. Not a dream, then. I glance over, rubbing my eyes. The fire's coals are almost completely out, which means it's close to dawn. My mate stands over Anna's basket, completely naked, his fine ass hanging out for the world to see. I admire it for a moment in the low light of the cave. It's as pale blue as the rest of him, and his tail flicks back and forth over taut buttocks. It's a real nice view, and the female side of me can't help but appreciate it as he bends over to pick up Anna and straightens, tucking her against his shoulder as she wails.

Then Elsa begins to scream, like usual. Their twin bond seems to extend to temper tantrums, and if one's bellowing, the other's never far behind. My breasts, bound and wrapped because they ache, are leaking at the sound of their distress. So much for sleep. "I'm up," I mumble, crawling out of bed and lumbering over to pick up Elsa.

We're silent, yawning as we bounce upset babies, rock them back and forth, pace around the cave, and try to quiet them. When

singing doesn't work (and oh boy, Dagesh is terrible at it), and fresh diapers don't silence them, I sit on my stool and tuck each one against a breast so they can nurse their tears away.

I wince as Anna bites down hard on my nipple, desperately trying to suck. My breasts feel full but nothing's coming out. "I think my milk's drying up again." I resist the urge to cry. I'm tired and the babies are non-stop, and now I can't even feed my girls?

"Maylak says it is normal," Dagesh yawns, and then presses a kiss to the top of my head. "I will stoke the fire and then go tell her you need healing."

"Let her sleep for a bit longer," I tell him. I'm always having to run to the healer to get her to get my milk started again. I hate that. I shift the babies and wince when Elsa gets all bitey, too. My poor boobs. My poor babies.

Dagesh watches the twins nurse for a moment, and then turns to pull his leggings on. "I should get up anyhow. The day is wasting."

It is? "I don't think it's even daylight yet..."

"Then I will start my hunting early." He finishes dressing, slings his pack of weapons over his shoulder and smiles at me, then heads out of the cave.

I try not to be disappointed. I know the hunters are super busy trying to feed everyone but I have the sinking suspicion that I won't see Dagesh again until the twin suns set. That five minutes of quiet? That'll be the only interaction I have with my mate for the rest of the day. By the time he gets home, he'll be exhausted, filthy from a day spent hunting, and barely able to keep his eyes open. He'll come kiss me on the head again, take a quick bath in the bathing pool, grab a bite to eat, and then collapse into the furs to sleep.

It's been like this ever since the babies were born. I knew I was big, but twins don't run in my family and I was just as surprised as my sweet, enthusiastic Dagesh when Maylak told us there were two babies. Just more for us to love, right? And I adore my sweet Anna and Elsa. Most of the time they're good babies, when they're not busy being tired, cranky, hungry little poop-monsters.

Except...I'd really love a freaking nap. Or three. And I'd love for my mate to snuggle up in bed with me. Better yet, I'd love for my mate to touch me and make my toes curl. It feels like in the three

months since the girls were born, not only have I not slept, but I haven't had sex. Heck, I haven't had sex since before the girls came, either, because I was so uncomfortably pregnant that Dagesh was afraid to touch me.

And now he just *won't* touch me. I sigh. Clearly there's a memo I'm missing about how to seduce my mate back to my bed. Georgie hasn't had that problem - my cave is right next to her and Vektal's which means that not only do I hear little Talie when she cries (which isn't all that often) but I also hear a lot of Vektal nailing Georgie. Like, a lot.

I'm freaking jealous.

I have to wonder, though, is it me? Am I not sexy to my mate now that I've got two kids strapped to my boobs and stretch marks all over my belly? Then again, I've never been the prettiest or sexiest human on the planet. Tiffany's gorgeous, and Liz has lovely blonde hair that goes on for miles. Georgie's got an incredible figure even after giving birth, and Josie's delicate and adorable. Stacy has incredible skin and Ariana has impressive boobs. I'm...well, I'm nice. I'm a little chunky in the thighs and breasts, my face is pretty unremarkable, and my blonde highlights grew out a long time ago. Now my long hair is two-toned - below my shoulders is a light blonde and above it is a darker, ashy brown. I never really gave a crap... until now, when Dagesh rushed out of the cave.

Of course, now I can't stop thinking about it.

The babies nurse for a while longer and then drift back to sleep. I burp each one, change their diapers again, swaddle them and gently place them back into their baskets. If they remain asleep for another hour, I might be able to catch another nap myself. That sounds like heaven. My brain is starved for sleep, and it's starting to feel like I won't get a full night's rest for another eighteen years.

I'm just crawling into the furs, my eyes drooping, when there comes a gentle scratch at the privacy screen over the entrance to our cave. "No-rah?" Maylak calls out gently. "Are you awake? Your mate said to come by?"

Crap. So much for a nap. I slide my tunic over my head and jump back out of bed. "I'm up. Come on in."

Maylak waddles in, hands on her belly, a peaceful smile on her blue face. In the last week or so, her belly has dropped and whereas she was just fit and lean before, she now looks as ungainly as I felt for oh, most of my pregnancy. She still looks a hell of a lot more serene than I was, though.

“Baby almost here?” I ask her, smiling.

She pats the underside of her belly. “Very soon. I am ready.”

“I’ll bet.” The sa-khui women are pregnant for three effin’ years. I’d have gone mad at the two year mark, but Maylak doesn’t seem to be antsy about it at all. “I hope Dagesh didn’t wake you.” I pull one of the sitting stools forward near the fire and offer it to her.

She declines, folding her legs and sitting gracefully on the floor, as if she weren’t a jillion years pregnant. “I was already awake. This one is active early in the morning.” Her hand slides over her belly and then she gestures at the floor. “Come, sit, and I will speak to your khui and encourage your milk.”

I sit down and she indicates that I should turn my back to her. We’ve done this before, and so I know the drill - I take my tunic off and bare my back, and she puts her hands on my skin and begins to hum. Her hands stroke up and down my spine and after a moment, her khui begins that weird, strange-pitched hum that I recognize as her ‘healing’ hum. Mine echoes it and I remain still as she rubs my back, communing with my khui or whatever it is she does. I know it works, though.

After a few moments, a new person steps into my cave. It’s Asha - the other young female sa-khui. She has Esha, Maylak’s little girl, in her arms. Her gaze flicks nervously to me, where I hold my tunic over my breasts, and then back to Maylak, who’s still rubbing my back and humming her healing song. “The screen was open,” Asha says, glancing between me and Maylak. “I was not sure—“

“It is fine,” Maylak murmurs in the same smooth tone she hums in. “Sit. No-rah and I will be done soon.”

Asha looks uncomfortably at me, but moves forward.

“I want to *play*, Sha-sha,” Esha says, grabbing one of Asha’s dark braids and yanking on it. “Go play with me!”

At Esha’s loud declaration, Anna whines in her basket, and I move to the babies to soothe them before they can wake up and

start crying. I stroke Anna's little blue cheek and hum gently, and then do the same for Elsa. The babies calm down again and settle back to sleep, and by the time I turn around, Asha is gone, along with little Esha.

"Come sit again," Maylak murmurs. "I will speak to your khui for a while longer. We must make sure your kits have enough to eat."

I sit down again, but I'm still thinking about Asha. It's strange that she showed up. "Are you and Asha good friends?" I ask, unable to keep my curiosity to myself. She never comes to hang out with the humans by the fire, and I thought it was because she didn't like us.

"She is my father's sister's daughter," Maylak says, rubbing my back once more.

I mentally go through the family tree before I realize she means they're cousins. "Oh."

"Asha is helping me with Esha while I am heavy with this kit and very tired. She watches my little one so I can sleep and preserve my strength. The healing tires me this close to birth, and there is always more healing to be done."

I immediately feel guilty. "Oh, Maylak—"

"That does not mean I will not do it," she chides. "It just means that I grow tired. I am the only healer in the tribe. It is my duty." She strokes my back a little harder, and then adds, "We will just not tell Kashrem about this."

I laugh. "He doesn't approve?"

"If it were up to him, I would spend all day in my furs, waiting for the kit to be born." I hear soft amusement in her voice. "He does not like that I tire myself on others and fusses almost as much as Esha."

I grin at the thought, picturing quiet, mild Kashrem fussing at his mate. Doesn't seem like him at all. "It's good that Asha's helping you out, then."

Maylak makes a noise of agreement. "She volunteers. She loves being around kits. They make her sad heart happy."

I feel another little stab of guilt, thinking. It's baby-central around the humans but Asha never comes to hang out. Georgie, Liz, Kira, Megan, Stacy, Ariana - heck, almost everyone has a new baby. I have two. "That is surprising to me. She never comes to see mine or any of the other human women. Does she not like us?"

Maylak hesitates. Her hands pause on my back, and then she begins her gentle rubbing motions again. I can feel the tingle of the khui's magic moving through my body, and my breasts are beginning to feel tingly. That's good. That means my milk is returning already. "She is lonely," Maylak says in a low voice. "She does not fit in anywhere. She has no kit. She does not love her mate. She does not feel welcome with the humans who are all so close to each other. So she stays in her cave and keeps to herself."

Did I feel guilty before? Because I feel a whole truckload of guilt right about now. I think back to a flurry of encounters, of days spent laughing and chatting by the fire...with my human friends. Maylak is always busy with her family or with healing, and the older women in the tribe, Sevvah and Kemli, have people in and out of their caves constantly. Farli joins the humans when she's not busy with her own tasks and Asha....well, Asha is never around. I thought it was because she hated us, and Kira has mentioned that Asha has tried to hit on Aehako when she was around, so it's fair that Kira doesn't like her.

But...wow. I try to picture myself in Asha's shoes, imagining a gaggle of alien women showing up and the men of the tribe going crazy over them. I imagine all these women getting pregnant and having children while my own died not long after childbirth. I imagine having to share a cave with a person I don't like simply because we resonated. And my soul shrivels a little at the thought. However prickly Asha might be, I don't think it's without reason. She must be so sad and lonely. "I feel awful. We're being mean girls, aren't we?"

"Mean...girls?" Maylak pauses. "I do not understand what this means."

"Long story," I murmur. "I just feel we haven't done our best to include Asha."

"You did not know how she felt, and she would never say."

Yes, but now I do know, and the mother in me wants to fix it. I've always been a bit of a nurturer, and my heart aches for Asha. How hard must it be to love babies and to see everyone around you having one and yours is...gone? I fight the urge to get up and crush my own delicate little twins to my chest. My sweet babies - I can't imagine life without them, or Dagesh. I adore my mate, but it's no

secret in the tribe that Hemalo and Asha loathe one another. It's tribe gossip and a juicy tidbit shared around a winter fire...until you realize that the person on the other end is probably hurting.

I'm going to change that, I decide. From this point on, I'm going to make it a personal mission to befriend Asha. No one should feel isolated and alone in their own home.

"There," Maylak says and pats my back. "I think we are done."

I get to my feet, pulling my tunic on. Then I pause, hitching it up and showing Maylak my belly. "I don't suppose you can do anything for stretch-marks?" I have to admit, they don't help me feel sexy. And right now with my mate constantly skipping out of the cave? I could use some sexy-mojo.

Her hard, stony brow furrows. "Why would you want to rid yourself of the marks?"

I sigh inwardly. Guess she doesn't think they're a problem, and I guess it's kinda selfish of me to ask. "Never mind."

DAGESH

The twin moons are high in the night sky when I return home that night. My body moves slow with exhaustion, but I drag myself through the main cave and head toward my home cave. No-rah will be there waiting for me, a smile on her face and my daughters at her breast. Just the thought fills me with so much joy that I stagger.

"Are you well, Dagesh?" A hand goes to my elbow and helps me straighten. It is Bek, standing guard at the main entrance. He gives me an uneasy look. "Are you sick?"

I scrub a hand down my face and shake my head. "Just tired. It has been a long day."

He grunts, shooting me another suspicious look. "Good hunting?" he asks after a moment. "Taushen and Ereven found nothing. They will go out further tomorrow."

His words send a pang of worry through my gut. The urge to turn around and head back out onto the trail is overwhelming, but I am physically exhausted. I cannot go further without rest and sleep. "I had a good day of hunting. Filled my cache."

He nods slowly and glances over at the main fire, where a few people sit and chat. "It is good. There will be many mouths to feed this brutal season."

I know it. I know it all too well. The thought echoes in my mind with every footstep and images of empty caches appear when I close my eyes at night. I think of my No-rah and Ah-nah and Ehl-sah. I must keep them safe and fed. This world is harsh and they are so very fragile. My belly cramps with worry and I grip my spear tight. "I will go out again early in the morning. The trails are good in my area and there is much to be done."

Bek nods, as if I have made a wise decision. "Then I will leave you to your rest."

I feel a surge of irritation and though I know it is not Bek's fault, I spin on my foot and turn away, tail lashing with anger. He does not understand. He thinks I am making a choice to go out and hunt all day, to push myself to exhaustion. To spend all my waking hours looking for hopper trails or dvisti tracks in the hopes of finding a kill, any kill.

Bek has no mate. He has not held the tiny hand of a daughter freshly-born and so vulnerable. He does not grasp that I do not do this for pleasure. He thinks I have a choice. There is no choice. It must be done. My family must be fed and kept safe. They *must*. I think of my lovely, soft No-rah. I think of her face pinched and hungry, her teats flat and unable to feed our kits. I think of their unhappy faces as they wait for me to return home to feed them.

I must feed them.

I...should go back out. The worry gnaws at me. There is game that creeps the snow at night. Snowcats hunt by moonlight, and scythe-beaks range all hours of the day. I could set more traps, dig a new cache. I could check the more distant trails...

A jaw-cracking yawn staggers me as I head toward my cave. Or I can sleep.

I hate that I must choose sleep. If I could avoid rest and manage to keep my family fed? I would do so. My brain is foggy with exhaustion, though. I must rest, if only for a few hours.

The privacy screen is up when I head home, and the fire banked. It is stuffy and over-warm in the cave, like No-rah likes it. I do not

mind, ignoring the sweaty discomfort of it. My own needs do not matter, not right now.

I check the fire and shove a dried dung-chip into the coals to keep it burning low. There is soup in a cooking pouch, still warm and left for me by my thoughtful mate. I wash my hands and face in the meltwater No-rah keeps in a bowl in the corner, but I avoid the food. Let her eat it in the morning. I prefer that she is fed rather than me.

My sweet mate's form is a soft bump in the furs; she is asleep. I move to the baskets that my kits sleep in and kneel beside them. Ah-nah has kicked her furs off as she always does, and I tuck them around her tiny body with the utmost care. I touch her sweet, fat little cheek with my finger and she turns toward me, her mouth working in her sleep. Pure joy surges through me, mixed with the ferocious need to protect my family. I look over at Ehl-sah and she is awake in her basket, her tiny blue eyes glowing in the dark as she gazes up at me. She waves a fist in my direction and I flick my tail toward her. I remember I loved to hold my father's tail and follow him when I was young. She grasps it and gurgles, her feet and hands waving in the air.

I pick her up, wincing when she yanks hard on my tail. She has a fierce grip, this little one. I hold her close, burying my face against her small, warm body. Her scent is one of the things I love best about being a father - the sweet scent of a kit's skin. Today, though, she smells a bit like milk and...a dirty loincloth. I set her down and change her quietly, even as she yanks on my tail and burbles happily.

When her cloth is changed, her eyes drift shut slowly once more, and I pry my tail back out of her small hands. I cover her up and gaze down at my kits with longing. They get bigger every time I see them. I feel as if I am missing all of their moments — but then I think of their faces pinched and hungry in the brutal season, and I am resolved once more.

Another jaw-cracking yawn erupts from my chest and I pull my leathers off, staggering to the bedside. My No-rah's back is to me, the pale, gentle slope of her shoulder begging to be touched. My cock stirs despite my exhaustion, but I ignore it. No-rah so rarely gets to sleep without interruption - one kit always seems to be awake

- and I do not want to wake her simply to sate my needs. They can wait.

I cannot resist touching her, though. I trace a finger lightly over the pale flesh of one smooth arm, and when she shivers, I pull away reluctantly. My hand goes to her tangled hair and I touch it, stroking it absently as I watch her sleep.

She was mine the first time I saw her. I think of that day so many moons ago, when the humans were pulled from their strange cave and a frightened No-rah looked at me with defiant, terrified eyes. My chest immediately resonated for her, but I kept it a secret. She was afraid, and I did not want her to fear me. I did not keep it secret for long - the moment she had her khui, she resonated to me.

We had mated furtively under the furs a short distance from the fire, too desperate for each other to care about privacy. I close my eyes, thinking of the little gasp she had made when I filled her with my cock. I lost my heart then.

It feels as if I lose it anew every time she smiles at me.

Now it has been almost two turns of the seasons, and her pale yellow hair has grown darker at the top, and long. Her face is not as full as it was, and she looks at me with sleepy, affectionate smiles instead of defiant fear. Every day, my need for her grows. There is nothing for me without No-rah. Nothing at all.

And I will do everything I can to keep her safe and fed.

I slide under the furs and press a kiss to her shoulder, hugging her against me. She murmurs something and then snuggles back against me, her skin cool against my own. The humans are fragile and cannot keep their heat, and it reminds me that I must work that much harder to protect my No-rah. I pull the blankets tight around our bodies, ignoring the fact that it is warm enough to be uncomfortable.

Only No-rah and the kits matter.

NORA

I wake in the morning to quiet. The babies are still asleep. Thank God. Dagesh is slumbering next to me, his hair still in braids from

yesterday. He normally undoes them when we sleep because he knows I like his hair, but he must have been too tired last night.

Maybe we can squeeze in a little cuddling before he's off for the day.

I get up and check on the babies, take care of my bladder in the bone chamberpot kept for occasions like this, and then wash my hands and rinse my mouth out before crawling back into bed. I snuggle against Dagesh's chest, sliding my hands over his stomach as he tugs me close, eyes still closed.

"Your hands are like ice," he murmurs in my ear. His mouth presses against my forehead in a sleepy kiss.

"Are they?" I guess I won't put them on his dick until they warm up. I stroke my hands over his fuzzy body, gliding over the ridges on his chest. "The babies are still asleep," I whisper, leaning in to lick at his shoulder. "We might have a few minutes for—"

Anna coughs awake, then wails angrily.

Damn it. I press my forehead to his chest in frustration. I don't even get five minutes, do I? Not with two babies and no Not-Hoth formula in sight. I'm the one-stop shop.

Dagesh groans low. He pats my back. "You sleep. I will get her."

"It's okay," I say, sitting up. "That's her hungry cry." My breasts are leaking in response to her wailing, so I might as well get up. "You sleep," I tell him, crawling to my feet. "I'll take care of Anna. Hopefully I can get her fed before Elsa wakes up." If so, maybe we'll have time for a bit of nookie after all—

But Dagesh gets to his feet and rubs his eyes with one hand. "I should be off to hunt anyhow."

I pick up my angry baby - poor Anna is always the fussy one - and tuck her against my breast, wrapping a fur around us for warmth. I sit on my favorite stool and frown as Dagesh picks up his scattered leathers and begins to put them on again. "You got home so late last night. Now you're going back out?"

He nods, strapping on his belt. He won't look at me. "Bek says the hunting is bad for the others. Taushen came back empty-handed yesterday. Ereven, too. I have been fortunate, so I must go out and continue to hunt. We must have food for the brutal season."

It hardly seems fair. We don't even get five minutes together lately. "So send them to go hunt on your trails and you take a day off, Dagesh."

Elsa whimpers and before I can pick her up, Dagesh is there. He cuddles her close, pressing a kiss to her tiny face before tucking her against my free arm so both twins can nurse. "I wish I could," he says, gazing down at us with an intensely thoughtful look. "But I must feed my family and my tribe. I will be home in time for dinner." He grabs his spear, leans down to press a kiss to my head, and then is out the cave again.

I sigh. Another day on the ice planet apart, it seems. I stare at the open doorway to my cave, because Dagesh forgot the privacy screen, and I think. Was he out the door the moment he was up before the babies got here? I don't think he was. Has...something changed between us? That can't be it, though. We're resonance mates. That's a forever sort of thing.

So what is it, then?



I don't allow myself to mope long. Dagesh is busy, but I know he loves me and adores the babies. Whatever's going on, we'll work it out. Maybe not today, since he's hunting, but soon.

In the meantime, I can choose to be lonely and sad in my cave all day, or I can hunt Asha down and befriend her.

Of course, getting around with twins in hand can be tricky. It takes me several minutes to adjust the twin carrier sling that Megan macraméd for me, and by the time I get one settled, the other starts to fuss. Or poop. By the time I get out of the cave to head to the main fire, I've already been cried at and peed on. But eventually I make it out to the main fire and arrive just as Stacy's making breakfast cakes out of root and some dried meat. It's not exactly McDonalds but it's filling. She hands me one and I eat it standing up, since the babies are being quiet. Georgie, Claire, Ariana, and Marlene are sitting around the fire today. All of them have their babies with them except Claire, who's only got a modest bump in her belly.

I take breakfast from Stacy and eat it standing up. The others are chatting quietly, Ariana anxiously patting the back of little Analay, who holds the record for being the fussiest baby in the entire cave. I tell myself it's revenge for how high maintenance his mama is, but I feel bad for Ariana. She's always exhausted trying to look after the constantly-crying Analay, and I know how that feels. My Anna's a fussybucket, but Analay is something else.

Of course, Ariana and Analay's presence means that I won't have to make a lot of excuses about why I'm not going to hang out by the fire this morning. One fussy baby means the others start in, and even Georgie's usually-happy Talie looks confused. She shoves a fist in her mouth and sucks on it, as if she's trying to decide if she's going to cry or not.

"I can't stay," I tell the others. "Got a lot of house-cleaning to do. Has anyone seen Asha?"

Marlene gives me an incredulous look. She snorts. "Why? Did she say something to you?"

This just confirms my feeling that we need to include her. The tribe is small and we all have to stick together. Poor Asha. "No," I say cheerily. "I'm going to do some...um, tea sorting, and I heard she was good with flavors." And I totally just made that shit up off the top of my head, but it sounds legit, even to me.

"Tea...sorting?" Georgie asks, pulling a tuft of fur out of Talie's hand before she can shove it into her mouth.

"Yes, tea sorting." I'm sticking with it. "I'm tired of the same flavors and I thought maybe she could help me put together some new ones. I have a ton of dried leaves I picked from just before the twins were born but they all look the same to me."

"She might still be in her cave," Ariana says. "Their cave is right next to mine and Zolaya's. I saw Hemalo in there earlier and I don't think they're early risers." Analay hiccups and then begins to wail, and Ariana's face falls. "Oh no. It's okay, little buddy! Come on." She gets to her feet, bouncing the baby, and wanders away trying to soothe him.

Talie's little face scrunches up and she lets out an unhappy bleat. A moment later, the bundle peacefully sleeping against Marlene's

breast wakes up. Pacy is papoosed on Stacy's back, and he gives an unhappy gurgle too.

I am so out of here before the twins pick it up. "Gotta jet," I tell them. "Thanks for the heads up. And for breakfast!" And I waddle out of there as fast as I can with two babies strapped to my front.

The cave network that makes up the tribal home is spacious and sprawling, and I take my time, wandering down a rocky hallway to lull my twins back to sleep. I pass by Harlow's cave and stop to say hi, since her privacy screen isn't up. Rukh is showing his son Rukhar a carved block made of bone, and Harlow's got a piece of equipment in her lap, a make-shift pair of magnifying lenses over her eyes. She blinks at me then goes back to work. "Hey, Nora. What's up?"

"Just avoiding crying-baby central," I say in a low voice, smiling as Rukh hides the block in one enormous fist and little Rukhar giggles and reaches for his dad's hand. Smart kid. Not even six months old and I'm pretty sure he's ahead of most normal human babies. "How are you guys?"

"Just working on trying to hitch together this stupid storm tracker. I thought it might be helpful for the upcoming season, but I can't get it to turn on and I need to ask the computer about it and she's back at the ancestor ship. Grr." Harlow shakes a fist at the square, piecemeal machine in her lap.

"Are you guys going back to the ancestor ship soon?" I know she and Rukh prefer living there, because Rukh's still not big on tribe life after living in exile for so long.

She shakes her head and moves a tiny wire with her fingers. "Vektal's got everyone on lockdown after that whole Lila thing. You know how he gets."

I sigh. Yeah, I do. When he feels people are fucking around or the tribe isn't running like a well-oiled machine, Vektal gets all iron-fist and cracks down on who comes and goes. "Probably doesn't help that the hunting is bad and the winter's gonna suck." I smooth a hand over Anna's white-blond hair. "Dagesh has been out twenty-four-seven hunting to try and prep for winter - sorry, the brutal season."

"Yup. Add all that together, and we're gonna be here for now."

As Rukh hides the block from Rukhar again, sending the baby into peals of laughter, I frown. My mate's out every day...and yet here's Rukh, playing with his son. I try not to feel jealous, but it's hard. "You going out soon, Rukh?" I can't help it; I have to ask.

He shakes his head. "Out two. Back one."

Rukh is normally pretty short with words, but that makes no sense to me. I glance over at Harlow to clarify.

"Just got back from a two-day stint," Harlow says, casting an affectionate look at her mate. "Today's his day off. He goes back out again tomorrow."

"You mean you guys get days off?" I joke, but I'm not finding it funny. Dagesh never takes a day off.

"Well, yeah," Harlow says, looking up at me. The magnifiers make her eyes seem enormous. "Man's gotta get some rest. R&R and all that."

"Of course." I need to talk to Dagesh, then. Why isn't he taking a day to relax? And then of course, the worry sets in again. Is it me? Is he avoiding me? That can't be it. We're resonance mates.

But then I think of Asha and Hemalo...and my stomach goes a little sour. "Well, I'm off," I say, smiling at them despite my worry. "I need to go find Asha and say hello."

"You do? Have fun." Harlow's tone is absent and she bends back over her machine. "Hey, Rukh, Can you put a finger here on this bracket, babe, while I work?"

I leave their cave, thinking about Dagesh. Dagesh, who never takes a day of rest. I'm concerned. My mate's a good man. He's strong and brave and tireless. He likes to joke that he's a hunter, not a thinker, but I think he's plenty smart. And I love him. I love his smile, his scent, the way he gives me that adorably blank stare when I use a human term he doesn't understand. I love seeing him with the babies. I can't imagine being with anyone else.

But there has to be something bothering him.

An awful stink starts to emanate from one of the babies slung in the chest carrier I'm wearing. Ah, crap. It's diaper time. I make it to Asha and Hemalo's cave just in time to see Hemalo stalking out, spear in hand and fur cloak over his shoulders. He gives me a courteous nod but doesn't stop. The privacy screen is open, though,

so I knock on the stone wall - a mental 'leftover' from human life even though the sound is practically inaudible - and step inside.

"I told you to go away," Asha snaps, not looking in my direction as she pulls her furs higher. She's lying in her blankets, her back to me. "Go hunt and leave me be."

"It's me," I say timidly. "Is this a bad time?"

She turns and sits up, startled. Her gaze flicks to the entrance of her cave, then to me and my babies. "Why are you here?"

Well, it's not the friendliest greeting but I can't blame her. I smile brightly. "I thought I would come by and see if you wanted to help me sort tea leaves."

She pushes her inky black hair back and narrows her eyes at me, as if she can't quite figure me out. "Sort...tea?"

"Yes. I have a pile of dried leaves and no clue with what to do with them." That part's true at least. I'm not much for domestic stuff. Every time there's a tea-leaf picking, I just grab handfuls of the stuff and go back to my normal chores. Could be why my tea normally tastes like, well, lawn clippings.

Her gaze flicks from my face down to the babies. "Your kit has a dirty loincloth." She touches her ridged nose. "I can smell it."

"I noticed that too. It's a smell that lingers so I should probably head back to my cave unless you want to scent yours up with some baby doody."

A hint of a smile touches her face. "You can change her here. I do not mind."

I have a sneaking suspicion it's so she can leave the dirty diaper on her mate's side of the bed or something. I can't help but notice that there's two sleeping pallets in the cave. Obviously Hemalo and Asha aren't sharing anything more than a room. "That's okay. We can go back to my cave and I can put the babies in their baskets there."

For a moment I think she's going to decline, but then she shrugs and gets to her feet. "If you can find no one else to help you..."

She thinks she's my last resort? Aw. That's kinda sad. I beam her a smile. "Actually I came to you because Maylak says you have a good eye for this sort of thing. You're so sweet to help me, truly."

Her smile broadens and there's a bit of spring in her step as she slips on her boots and then follows me out of her cave back to mine. I keep up a steady stream of small talk as we walk back, because I know that the others are going to be watching us together, curious. Let them be curious. I've decided Asha needs including and damn it, I'm going to include her.

We get back to my cave and I sigh at the sight of it. My furs are everywhere and the babies' things seem to be scattered everywhere. "I'm sorry about the mess."

"Do not worry," she says, leaning over to pick up a discarded blanket. "You have your hands full with two kits. Even one is a challenge."

"I'd say it's too much, but the truth is, I wouldn't change a thing," I admit. "I love them both so much." I carefully pull the twins free from the baby sling on my chest and then set them in their beds. Elsa needs changing, and I pull off her little tunic and diaper as quickly as I can, because Anna's starting to screech at being put down.

To my surprise, Asha picks up Anna and tucks the baby against her shoulder. There's a look of fierce joy and longing that crosses her face, and she closes her eyes, just holding my baby against her. There's an aching lump in my throat at the sight. Poor Asha. For all that she can be unpleasant, she's also unhappy.

"Thank you," I tell her softly. "Sometimes I don't have enough hands."

She chuckles and opens her eyes, her big blue hands cradling Anna with the utmost care. "You may borrow mine at any time."

"You joke, but I might take you up on that," I tell her as I clean Elsa off and change her clothing. When I turn around, Asha's settling in on my favorite stool and Anna's asleep tucked against her shoulder. She holds her other hand out for Elsa, and looks excited at the thought of holding both of my squirmy, fussy children. Like I'm going to turn that down? I hand her Elsa and she settles the baby carefully in the cradle of her lap, one hand resting on her to make sure she stays in place. She seems to know instinctively how to hold the twins, and then I feel bad for thinking that. Of course she knows how to hold a baby - she had one of her own, even if it was only for a few days.

And now that someone else has the babies? I feel so...relaxed. "You sure you don't mind?" I ask her, hesitating.

"It is my joy to help out," she says, and presses a smiling kiss to Anna's tiny head. This is the most I think I've seen Asha smile in the two years we've been here.

"Well, while you keep them busy, I'm going to grab my tea bag," I say, and head to the far corner of the cave where, theoretically, stuff should be neatly stored and is instead stacked messily. I'm not much of a housekeeper and with infant twins? That idea went right out the window.

"Take your time," she murmurs.

I do, straightening a few things and chatting with her as I tidy up. Eventually, I grab my tea bag and several bowls and dump the lot onto a sorting skin. Tea's a big deal with the sa-khui. There's no soda fountain, no coffee, no nothing to drink but water, so they're experts at flavoring things with tea and know just what leaves to use to get the best flavors. Me, not so much. They just look like piles of leaves to my inexperienced eye. "So like, what are the best flavors that go together?"

"Which flavors do you like?" Her voice is dreamy. I glance over and her expression is soft with longing as she holds my children. "I am jealous of you, you know. You have two and I have none." Her eyes are curiously shiny.

"Mmm." I sort through the leaves, doing my best to ignore the twinge of unease her words stir in me. "I hope this isn't a prelude to you deciding to snatch one of them." There's nothing but silence at my joke, and I look up to see her aghast expression. "Oooor maybe that's just a human thing?"

"Humans steal the kits of other humans?" She looks horrified. "Why?"

"Because they want one? I don't know. Some people aren't well." The look on her face makes me feel better, though. I guess it never occurred to her. Gosh, sometimes I love this ice planet for being so darn simple and uncomplicated.

"I would never take your kits, No-rah." There's a wounded note in her voice.

“Oh, I know you won’t, Asha. I’m just messing with you. Now which tea leaves make a really good breakfast flavor?” I hope she’ll take the hint for the topic change.

But her expression doesn’t change. “Your kits are beautiful, but I miss mine.” She holds Anna, tucked under her chin, and closes her eyes for a long, long moment. “My Shamalo did not live to have her khui. She was too small at birth.” Her sad eyes blink open. “Now I have nothing.”

Jeez, she’s going to make me cry. I reach over and pat her knee. “You have your mate.”

She snorts. Her eyes roll with disgust. “I do not want him. Not now, not ever. If there is no kit to be made, I would not care if I never saw him again.”

Ouch. “Well, look on the bright side. If he’s out hunting for long periods of time, you won’t miss him like I miss my mate.”

“It is not an easy time,” she agrees.

“And having two babies doesn’t help things,” I say glumly, picking up a dried leaf and then tossing it aside. “Nora can’t exactly get her groove back if Nora’s mate isn’t around.”

“Groof?”

I wave a hand. “Nothing. I’m just whining and lonely.”

“He will not touch you?” Asha asks, the expression on her face shrewd. “Is that what groof means?”

“Something like that.” Now I’m embarrassed I brought it up.

“Did you ask him to touch you?”

Her blunt words make me blush. “I shouldn’t have to ask after I had his kids, should I?”

“You are tired. He is tired. Perhaps he thinks you are too tired for his cock.”

Okay, now I really *am* blushing. “Maybe a girl wants to be chased a little.”

“Why?” Now Asha looks genuinely puzzled. “If you want to mate, tell him so. Dagesh is like any other male - he will be more than happy to mate if a female asks.”

“Yes, but...” I cast around for the right way to explain it. “Humans are different. We like to be courted. We like for our man to say sweet words and do nice things for us to show us how much he wants us.”

“Why?” She looks confused. “You are resonance mates. Of course he wants you.”

It occurs to me that if Asha doesn't get why I want my man to flirt with me, it's probably likely that Dagesh doesn't get it, either. Maybe it's like she says, and he's waiting for me to roll over and say “Dick, please!” for him to get the hint. Theoretically, that should be easy enough to do...except I just had twins and I'm not feeling my sexiest.

But I miss my mate. I miss the closeness we've had and the comfort of his arms. Okay, then. I'm going to have to suck it up and ask for dick. Maybe it's time for a game plan - a sexy, low-cut tunic, doing something with my hair, even some perfume. I could make myself pretty and available and maybe he'll get the hint. I finger my grown-out highlights. They're hideous, but haircuts haven't been high on my to-do list like napping and, well, napping. “Maybe I'll do something with my hair.”

She shrugs.

I toy with my strands for a moment longer, and then look over at her. “I don't suppose you'd want to watch the babies tonight for me? Just for a few hours?”

“So you can demand cock from your mate?” Her eyes gleam with amusement.

Man, we are really going to have to teach these sa-khui a few more delicate euphemisms. I pick up a leaf and twirl it, trying to imagine the set-up for tonight's seduction. “Something like that, yeah.”

Asha nods. “I will watch them. Also, you should not drink tea from that leaf.”

I look at it more closely now. “Why?”

“It is used for a tea that makes loose stools.” She pats Anna's back. “A belly cleanse. Very strong.”

I see several of the leaves mixed in with the rest of mine. “Probably a good thing you're here, then.”

She laughs. “Probably.”

DAGESH

Today was an excellent hunt. My back, my bones and my muscles ache as I hike the trails back to the tribal cave. All day I have hauled dvisti into a new cache and marked it. It was a great deal of food, but there is always more to be done, and there are always more dvisti. As I dragged the last of the half-frozen carcasses to the cache, I saw another herd in the distance, heading toward the mountains. It is a large herd, and it would be smart to follow after them and trim their numbers.

But that is for tomorrow. I could head after them tonight, but I am full of longing to see my mate and my kits. Even if they are sleeping, just seeing their faces will be enough. Every day, I must remind myself what I work for. It is for my No-rah and our little ones. It is so they smile through the long brutal season and do not cry with hunger.

By the time I make it to my cave, I am slow with exhaustion. My No-rah has been busy - the furs are straightened and the baskets reorganized. The fire is not banked for sleep despite the late hour, but the coals are burning low, a sign that it has not been tended. Curled up in the furs is my mate, her cheek resting on her hand. I smile at the sight of her, so lovely, and then move to the kits' baskets.

They are...empty. Their blankets are flat, no little blue babies with yellow hair inside them.

Raw terror clutches at my chest. Where are my girls? Where are Ah-nah and Ehl-sah? I touch the furs to make sure my eyes do not deceive me, and then rush to No-rah's side. "Wake! Ah-nah and Ehl-sah! They are gone—"

"Mmm," No-rah says sleepily. She sits up and her tunic falls over her shoulder, exposing most of one full breast. "The babies? Oh, I had Asha take them tonight."

"Asha?" I repeat, not sure I have heard correctly. "Hemalo's Asha?"

"I don't think she wants to be his," No-rah says sleepily. "But yes. Was I asleep? I'm sorry. I was only going to nap for a moment..." Her voice trails off into a yawn. "Man, that was a great nap, though."

Relief pours through me and I begin to relax. I sit down next to my mate and rub my face, yawning as well. "I did not see the kits," I murmur. "I panicked—"

“It’s all right,” No-rah soothes. Her hands pull at my tunic, undoing the laces, and hers is still hanging low over one shoulder. Her breast gleams pale in the firelight and my cock stiffens in response. Her cool fingers smooth over my skin and my hands ache to touch her.

Then I notice that her pretty mane is shorn off.

I gasp, touching her locks. Before, she had yellow hair below her shoulders but now it is gone. Nothing but the soft brown remains.

“Your mane!”

She touches her hair. “Do you like it?”

“It is gone!”

Her face falls. “Is that a no?”

“It is just...why did you cut it?”

“It was all grown out,” No-rah says, and I do not know what that means. “I didn’t like the way it looked.”

The look on her face is wary, and I caress her cheek. “You are lovely, no matter what you do to your hair.” I cannot help but eye it thoughtfully. So strange.

She pats my shoulder and helps me shrug off my filthy tunic. “I’ll wash this for you tomorrow. Are you staying in? The other hunters take a day off every now and then, you know.”

I think of the big herd of dvesti heading toward the mountains. “I must go out and hunt,” I tell her. “There is a new herd close by and it will be much meat.”

No-rah sighs. “If you must.” She moves closer to me, and her full breast brushes against my arm. I bite back my groan of lust. It has been many moons since I claimed my mate, but the last thing I want to do is grab at her when she clearly needs sleep. “How about I give you a massage because you’ve been working so hard?”

“Mah-sashzh?” I do not know this word; I do not even think I can say it.

She gives me a little, flirty smile. “I’ll rub your back for you. It feels good. And then after that, maybe we’ll play a little.” Her finger trails seductively down my stomach.

“I like this idea,” I tell her, cock aching. I watch her with fascinated eyes as she gets to her knees and then pats the furs. I lie down and then a moment later, she puts her hands on me.

And then I cannot help the groan that escapes. As she starts to rub, all the aches and worries of the day ebb. I close my eyes as her hands glide over my skin, pressing against sore muscle and bruised tissue. “I had a good day today,” she says in her soft, sweet voice. “Asha came by and helped me with the babies. I wasn’t sure what to think at first, but I really like her.”

“Mmm?” My mind is in a pleasant fog, drifting. This is something from a dream - my sweet, sexy mate rubbing her hands on my body, me lying down in the furs as she tends to my aches. Her words continue, but I lose focus. I am so very weary.

I will just close my eyes for a moment.

NORA

Well, shit.

Sexy massage? It backfired. Big time. I gaze down at my mate, who is sound asleep and snoring, his mouth open on my pillow. I... can’t even be mad. He’s so exhausted. Operation: Sexy Time will just have to wait for another day. I lie down on the furs next to him, wrap an arm around his waist, and decide to sneak a nap myself.



“I don’t understand it,” I complain to Asha the next morning as we sort through more tea. She’s brought several pouches of her own stash and we’re combining flavors while the babies sit on a nearby fur and flail their arms happily. “I know he loves me. I know he loves the babies. But every time I suggest he stay home and relax, he ignores it and rushes right back out the door to go hunting again.”

Asha plucks a dried twist of leaves from my hand and places it in the section that we’ve marked off as ‘medicines’. Whoops. I really, really don’t have an eye for this sort of thing. “It is fear.”

“Fear?” I echo. “Fear of what?”

She gives me a look. “Fear of failing you. There are none of us in the tribe that have not experienced a brutal season where bellies went empty. That is probably why he hunts so much. He has you, and he has his kits to feed. And I have known Dagesh for a long

time. He is very....” She hums, trying to think of the right word. “Devoted.”

I nod slowly. My baby is super responsible. He’s given some tasks that others won’t do, just because Vektal knows he’ll give two hundred percent. I think of Dagesh and I feel guilty. Here I’ve been resenting the fact that he’s out the door before the sun rises, leaving me alone with two small children, and he’s probably been going through an entirely different kind of pressure. I think Asha’s right — he feels an intense need to hunt enough to take care of us. He’s been without family for a long time; I know from late night conversations in the furs that his mother died not long after he was born and his father died in the terrible khui sickness. I think he’s making himself crazy trying to please everyone.

My poor Dagesh. He’s trying so hard. I feel a surge of love for him. His fear is understandable, but it’s not going to help if he runs himself into the ground trying to take care of everyone and everything. He has to realize that there needs to be some balance, and that we’re not going to starve to death the moment he turns his back. Is there a concern over a food shortage? Sure, but everyone else is hunting just a little more, not hunting twenty-four-seven. Everyone else’s mates take a day off to spend with their families. My sweet, obsessed mate needs to put his spear down for a day or two and relax. It would be different if we hated each other like Asha and Hemalo. Then, I wouldn’t mind if he disappeared all day every day. But the truth is...I miss him. I ache for him - not just his body but his smile, his warmth, his presence, his touch, his unwavering support.

I look over at Asha again. “How would you feel about watching the babies for me again?”

Asha goes very still. “You...trust me?”

“Of course. Why wouldn’t I? You’ve been so wonderful to help me the past few days.” I smile at her so she knows I’m not pulling her leg.

Her own smile slowly blossoms across her face. “I would love to.” She leans over and lifts a flailing Anna off the blanket and holds her close. “They are such good kits.”

Are they? That might change when she’s been around them for a full evening, but I can’t disagree - I like to think they’re special, too. “I

know I'll have to feed them so you can come interrupt, of course, but just a few hours of alone time with my mate would be absolutely wonderful."

"Say no more," Asha replies. "I will watch them and come to you only if they need to eat. You should convince your mate he needs to rest."

"That's the game plan."

"I think the plan is to get your groof back."

Heck yeah, it is. I'm totally getting my groof back. I laugh and toss a few leaves into a pouch. Nora's groof is totally scheduled to come back tonight.

DAGESH

I do not make it back to the tribal caves for several days in a row. The snows fall thick, like a cascading mane, and I cannot see my hand in front of me. I am confined to my hunter cave for two sunrises and then when I can finally emerge, I must go and re-mark the trees that I have left caches at to ensure that they can be found when the snows get higher. By the third sunset, I am on my way back to the tribal cave when a pair of hoppers cross my path and so I hunt them down, too. My mate will have fresh meat tonight. It is something I can be proud of, at least, though I worry over the days missed. I hate that the storms caught me away from the cave - if I had to spend two days lounging around a fire, could I not have done it with my mate in my arms? A burst of longing rushes through me and I think of No-rah and her happy smile. I think of the tufts of yellow mane on my two kits. I miss them all so fiercely it is like a pain in my chest. It makes me walk faster through the snow-covered trails and sloping hills, because I *need* to see them.

I try to keep the worry from my mind as I hike back, but it has been too long. Anything can happen in three full sunrises. What if the tribal cave has been buried by thick snow and no one can get out? What if metlaks have descended upon the caves and attacked my No-rah while she left to gather herbs? What if Ah-nah - who is always crying - has khui sickness and Maylak cannot heal her? What if No-rah's milk has dried entirely and the kits cannot be fed? Worried

thoughts rush through my head like water until I am running back at full speed, desperate to see my family. I need to hear my No-rah's laugh, I need to touch my daughters on their fat, blue cheeks and make sure they are well.

When I return, Bek is in front of the tribal cave, yawning and leaning against the cliff wall. He looks bored. I know he has guard duty, but the sight of him lounging while I have been hunting tirelessly to feed my family? It does not sit well with me. He rouses himself from the wall as I approach, giving me a cocky look. "Decide to return finally?"

As if I had a choice? "If you are going to guard," I bite out, "Try being alert. I do not think a metlak would tap you on the shoulder to wake you if it attacks."

Flustered, he flicks his head, as if he wants to charge at me and lock horns. My tail flicks angrily and I brandish my horns back at him. He wishes a fight? I will give him one.

Bek's jaw clenches as he approaches me slowly, fists tight. He lifts his chin at me. "I am going to ignore your words and let you pass to see your mate, because we are friends."

I glare at him but he only taps a hand on my arm and then walks away. "If you still wish to fight in the morning, come see me."

I am tempted to do so simply from that arrogant comment. But I know Bek. I have grown up with him. He is like me — we are not thinkers, we are doers. I have insulted him, he has insulted me with his arrogance, and we must snarl at each other. My weary mind tells me this, even as my tail lashes back and forth, my body still ready to fight.

A female laugh echoes from inside the cave and I jerk around, reminded that I am close to my mate. Close to my kits. Close to all my females. My family. I have no time to fool around with Bek like two hard-headed dvisti stallions. "I will deal with you another day," I tell him.

He snorts, reminding me of an angry dvisti after all. "Go chase your female. I will be here, doing my duty." His voice is sour. "I have nothing else to go home to."

There is a bitter ring to his words, and I realize he is right. He has nothing and I have my mate and my family waiting for me. I do not

need to spend time here fighting with him. A slow smile spreads across my face.

Bek rolls his eyes at me and scoops up his spear as I turn away.

I jog in to the cave, looking for the female laughter. There is a group of females sitting next to Sevvah by the fire, laughing and sewing. My No-rah is not there, and I ignore their calls of greeting and head deeper into the cave, looking for my mate.

She comes out of Vektal and Shor-shie's cave a moment later, laughing and holding an armful of furs. Her shorn, shoulder-length hair is in two short braids by her ears and her face is lit up with happiness.

"No-rah!" I call out, my heart surging at the sight of her. She is so lovely, my mate. I could gaze at her for hours on end and be content.

Her gaze flicks over to me and she gives a happy little squeak of surprise. No-rah tosses the furs down onto the cave floor and flings herself the short distance to my side, her arms wide. A moment later, she leaps onto me, flinging her arms around my neck and showering my face with kisses.

I hold her tight and kiss her small face back, over and over again. My world is feeling more and more right by the moment. When was the last time she kissed me with such joy? She loves me, but we have been so tired lately. This, I realize, I need just as much as her smiles. I need her kisses, her small, cold human hands sliding over me. "I missed you," I growl at her, fighting the urge to drag her to the floor and claim her like a barbarian.

No-rah presses another happy kiss to my face. "I missed you, too! Where have you been? I was so worried."

"Caught in the storm." I press another kiss to her mouth, but the father in me cannot help but ask, "Where are the kits?"

She chuckles, and the sound is so light and airy it makes me smile in response. "Asha has been helping me. She loves playing with Anna and Elsa. Come, I'll show you." With one last kiss, she slides back down to the floor. I move to her discarded fur bundles and pick them up, holding them in front of my loincloth so no one notices just how much I have missed my mate. Others come up and give quick greetings, but my attention is only for my mate, who takes my hand and pulls me along to our cave. Her hips sway as she

walks, and she glances back at me with a sultry promise in her eyes that makes me very glad I have the furs to hold in front of my cock.

When we get to our cave, Asha is there, holding a small bone rattle over the twins, who are lying on a blanket. She casts a look at No-rah, then rises and steps away as I bound forward to hold my daughters. I have missed their little faces, their toothless smiles, and even the stink of a dirty loincloth. I hug Ah-nah close and kiss her round face a dozen times before No-rah takes her from my hands and I pick up Ehl-sah and give her the same attention. "I have missed my family," I say, holding Ehl-sah close. It feels as if I can truly relax for the first time in a handful of days.

No-rah casts a worried look at Asha, and then hands her the kit. "Kiss them for now, Dagesh, because they're going with Asha tonight."

I frown in surprise. "They are? Why?"

"Because you and I are going to have a night off, just the two of us." She picks up a stack of kit-sized loincloths and puts them in a basket. "We are going to have a relaxing evening and we are going to talk."

I hold my daughter in my arms, trying not to scowl as Asha hitches Ah-nah on her hip and heads away with the basket that No-rah hands her. "We are talking now."

No-rah gives me a patient look and then holds her hands out for Ehl-sah. "We are going to talk." As Asha leaves, No-rah glances at her and then moves closer to me. "That is human-speak for 'you are going to give me your cock'."

Oh.

Oh. I swallow a laugh, kiss my tiny daughter one more time, and then hand her off. My body hums pleasantly at the thought, and even though my khui is quiet in my chest, I am filled with lust for my mate, almost as intense as resonance. It has been a long time since we held each other and explored. I have missed it, and I have missed my No-rah. I watch as she bundles Ehl-sah into her basket and then takes the entire thing to Asha's cave. She means it when she says we will have a night together. The thought fills me with an absurd amount of pleasure.

While she is gone, I strip my filthy leathers off my body and wash with a bit of melt-water warming over the fire. I grow sleepy, lulled by the warmth in the cave, my eyes drifting closed. It has been a long handful of days, a long turn of the moon. I think of tomorrow, and all the things that must be done. There are traps to set, pits to dig, caches to check in on, and hunter caves to re-supply. I am weary to the bone just thinking about all of it. I would rather stay with No-rah in the cave and kiss every inch of her soft human body. But lying in the furs with my mate does not feed her in the brutal season, so I must go out. I scrub a hand over my face and pull a fresh tunic over my chest. I must stay awake. I need to touch my mate, to take her body under mine. To taste her. I groan at the thought. How long has it been since I buried my face between her legs and tasted her cunt? Far too long.

No-rah does not return right away, and I take a few bites of dried *kah* and then lie down in our nest of furs, waiting for my mate. My eyes start to drift closed, the exhaustion I struggle with creeping up on me.

A hand touches my shoulder, rousing me. I jerk upright, nearly knocking No-rah in the head with my horns.

She giggles and moves back. "Sorry. I was gone a bit longer than I thought."

"I fell asleep," I murmur, trying to hold back a yawn. I reach for her, pulling her into my arms. "Come, we will mate now—"

No-rah laughs sweetly again, and tucks her body against mine, but pulls the blankets up. "We can sleep first. You're tired."

"I am tired but I also wish to mate," I say, pressing a kiss to her cheek. Her jaw is so small and delicate, I cannot help but run my fangs along it.

She shivers and then gives my shoulder a tap. "Fine, if you want to stay awake, we need to talk."

"I am not a good talker," I tell her. I would rather keep distracting her.

"Oh stop that. You are plenty smart."

"I am. Look at how much we are talking now," I tell her between nips at her throat. I roll our twined bodies until she is under me, in the furs. "Look at how much our mouths are moving."

“Yours, maybe,” she teases, but her laughter turns to a small sigh of pleasure when my tongue grazes her throat. Her hands go to my horns and she holds me against her. “You’re distracting me, aren’t you?”

“I am tasting you,” I correct. “Not distracting.”

“But I really want to talk.”

“You may talk,” I tell her. I grab the hem of her tunic and tug it upward. “As long as my mouth is free to taste you.”

My sweet No-rah makes another soft pleasure-sound, her hips rising on the furs. “I just want to know what’s wrong. Why you never come home anymore.”

I sit up, distracted away from my enticing mate. “You think I do not want to be here?”

The look in her eyes is troubled. “I don’t know. I tell myself that we’re fine, you and I, but then you’re up before dawn and you don’t come home again until I’m asleep.”

“I am hunting—“

“I know you are.” Her hand moves to my arm and she strokes it, soothing me. “I know you’re working super hard, baby. But that’s not my concern. My concern is that everyone else’s mates take a day off every now and then to relax. You never do. Ever since the girls have been born, you’re out the door.” Her mouth purses and there’s the barest quiver to her lower lip. “Sometimes I think it’s me.”

“What? Never.” I fall back over her, pressing quick, hot kisses to her face and throat. This is a human custom I love, this kissing. I can never get enough of putting my mouth on my mate. “If it were my choice, I would lie in bed all day with you. But I cannot. You must be fed. The twins must be fed.” Even now, the thought of the kits hungry and scared in the deep, cold days of the brutal season sends fear through my body.

She gives a small protesting shake of her head. “But we are being fed—“

“What if it is not enough?” The worry I have been sitting on for so long claws out of me. “What if we get halfway through the brutal season and the food runs out? We ran low on food this last season.” I try not to think about it, but it burns in my gut. “The heavy snows

will be coming sooner this year, and there are more people to feed. What if—“

No-rah puts a finger over my lips, silencing me. “Then we’ll figure it out. But we’re going to be better prepared this year. The storage rooms are already full. All of the hunters are working extra to fill the caches. Tiffany’s got plants, and we’re drying berries. No one’s going to be caught unawares.” Her hand touches my arm, then reaches for one of my long braids and begins to play with it. “But you won’t be able to help if you kill yourself with exhaustion.”

Her hands - even if only on my mane - feel good. This closeness, this comfort feels good. I have missed it in my constant need to go hunt. “I just want to do everything I can.”

“I know you do, Dagesh.” The human way she says my name always makes me smile - she cannot pronounce it right, but she always tries hard. “But if you can’t hunt one day, the others will pick up the slack. That’s why we’re a tribe. We all pitch in and help the others. No one is going to let anyone starve.”

I take a deep breath and nod. What she is saying makes sense. “It is...hard. I always see more I can do.”

“There will always be more to do,” she tells me. “How do you think I feel with the babies? And the cave? And cooking? And sewing? Hell, I used to go to the store for everything and now I have to make my own freaking underpants. Do you know how overwhelming that is?”

I frown. “No. I do not—“

She pats my arm again. “Bless your heart, baby. Just imagine that it’s all very different for me too, and I’m trying. But we take things one day at a time. That’s all we can do. And while I think it’s wonderful that you’re such a hard worker, me and the girls need you around, too.” Her fingers work on the end of my braid and she manages to pull the tie loose, freeing my mane.

“Because you need help with them?” Another surge of guilt washes through me.

“No,” she says, dragging her fingers through my mane to undo my braid with gentle tugging motions. “Asha has shown me that everyone will help, and all I need to do is ask. If the babies get overwhelming, someone else can help out.” Her gaze meets mine. “I

want you here because I love you and I miss you, and I don't want you to miss out on when the girls start walking."

My lips twitch with a smile as I think of her earlier words. "And because you want my cock?"

She grins. "That, too."

I lean down to kiss her funny little human mouth with its square, blunt teeth. "How could you think I do not want you?"

"Um, how about because we haven't had sex since before the babies were born? I checked with the healer and she said I've been good to go for a while now, but you've been too busy."

She has been wanting to mate? I think of the long nights where I have held her, my body full of need, but afraid to push her too hard. "Why did you not say before today?"

"Because that's not how humans do things! The guy makes the first move! They flirt and court the girl!"

"Court? What do you mean, court?" Why are there so many rules to humans?

"I mean, you tell me you want sex!" The look on her face is the one she has when she is embarrassed.

"You just pushed two kits out of your body. Two. I do not know how that feels. How am I to know if you are ready for mating unless you tell me?"

"I've been dropping hints!"

"I do not know these hints."

She rolls her eyes, but she's smiling. "You are the worst flirt ever, Dagesh."

I sit up and spread my hands wide. "Who am I to flirt with? Maylak? She has a mate. Asha? She also has a mate. And before they had mates, they had pleasure-mates. When I met you, we resonated immediately. I have no need to flirt, because my khui chose you."

"So this is your way of telling me that you've been missing my signals? What about when I wear the low-cut tunic?"

I give her an exasperated look. "You are nursing our daughters. Your tunic is off more than it is on."

No-rah giggles again. "Okay, fine. So you're telling me I need to be more forward."

“You told me earlier you want my cock. That is the first indication you have given me that you are ready for mating.” I lean in to kiss her smiling mouth again. “It is always ready for you.”

“Well, then,” she says in a throaty voice. “I will learn to be more obvious. How’s this for a signal?” And she reaches between us and cups my sac in her hand.

I nod solemnly. “It is a good one.”

“You can signal me back, you know,” No-rah says. “Tell me that you’re feeling sexy and want some attention from your mate. There’s always things we can do.” She releases my sac and then strokes my shaft lightly before her fingers dance to my spur and tease it.

I groan, desperately wanting to shove my cock into her hand so she can rub it again. “My signal is more...intense.” Immediately I picture how I would signal my mate that I want her, and nearly spill my seed in her hand.

“Oooh? I think you need to show me.”

I think I do, as well. I slide down her body and grab the waistband of her leggings, tugging them down. I hear her startled little gasp but I do not pause. I have dreamed of doing this ever since she grew too pregnant to mate comfortably. I have missed her taste, the softness of her folds against the ridges of my tongue. I tug her leggings to her knees before she kicks them off, and then pull one of her slim legs over my shoulder. “You are so smooth and soft,” I murmur, brushing my mouth along the inside of her thigh. I want to taste her all over, all night long.

No-rah whimpers my name and her hands go back to my horns. “I think I like your signal.”

I know she does. I like it, too. I can smell the scent of her arousal the closer I get to her cunt, and I can see her pink folds peeking out from under the curls that shield them. I push her thighs further apart and bury my face against her, as I have thought about for several turns of the moon now. The taste of her sweetness dances over my tongue and I groan again, licking with long, intense strokes to capture every bit of juice. “This, I have missed,” I rasp between licks.

“God, me too,” she breathes, and I can feel her body quiver. I can feel her shudder with every lap of my tongue, and I focus on her little

third nipple between her folds, because I know she likes it when I circle it. No-rah moans and pushes her hips up, encouraging me.

My cock is brutally hard, my need for her intense. I feel as if I am right back to the first time we mated, when I pushed into her and spent immediately, not used to pleasing a mate. It took me two turns of the moon to learn to hold out long enough to make sure she came first. Now I make sure she does every time, but tonight? Tonight it will be difficult to wait.

I must make her come fast, then.

I burn to be inside her, but I know I will not last long when I am. So I must please her with my tongue and my lips, first. I lick her folds, dragging my tongue over her softness over and over again, until she is crying out her pleasure. When her hips arch again, I push a finger inside her, and nearly spill at how tight and wet she is. My mate's sweet cunt is so ready for my cock.

No-rah cries out, her hands gripping my horns hard as I rub my finger inside her. There is a spot, just inside, that feels different than the rest of her slick warmth, and I seek it out. I found it once and she went wild in the furs when I did. I want to see her do that again.

I rub my finger along the inside of her tight cunt and feel a small, textured patch on her walls. Her loud cry immediately rings out, and then she grabs a pillow and stuffs it over her face. Aha. I have found it. Pleased with myself, I lick her third nipple and rub at the spot inside her again, waiting.

It does not take long; a moment later she is screaming my name into the pillow, her hips jerking as her cunt clenches around my finger, and her juices flood my mouth. She comes so hard I feel her entire body quake with the force of her reaction, and it makes me wild with need.

I press one last kiss to her tasty cunt, then rise onto my haunches over my mate. I push her thighs apart and shove my cock into her warmth, desperate to seat myself inside her.

She screams into the pillow again, this time a "Yes!"

My eyes nearly roll back into my head with overwhelming pleasure as her tight cunt grips my cock, clenching hard around it. Her folds rub against my spur as I thrust forward, slicking it. I love the feeling, and I take one hand and squeeze her folds together as I

thrust again. It pushes my spur along her slick channel, and the cry that chokes out of her is nearly as great as my own. Her cunt squeezes me tight and then I feel her body quake as she comes for a second time.

My own release floods out of me. With a groan, my sac tightens against my shaft and then I lose control, thrusting into my mate's soft warmth with ferocious intensity as my seed floods out of me. Spots dance behind my eyelids, and I keep thrusting shallowly as I wait for my breath to return. It does, eventually, and I press gentle kisses to my No-rah's sweaty face as she peels the pillow away and gasps.

"My love," I murmur. "My heart."

"God, I missed that," she says and throws her arms around my neck. "Didn't realize how much until now."

Me, either. I roll onto my side and hold her body tight against mine, our damp skin pressing together. We are going to do this again as soon as my strength returns, I vow. Several times this night, and once more at dawn.

Her hand smooths down my arm, as if she cannot stop touching me. "I love you."

"You are my heart," I tell her again. "Never doubt that."

"Then take a day off," No-rah encourages. She grabs my tail and grips it at the base, stroking where it meets my backside. The feeling is...intense and my tired cock springs to life once more. "Stay in tomorrow. We'll relax and you can hang out with me and the babies."

"I want to, but—"

"No buts," she chides me. "We are not going to starve because you miss one day of hunting."

I grunt. Maybe she is right. Maybe I will tell Bek to get off his arrogant backside and go hunt in my stead and I will stand at the front of the cave with my spear. No-rah can keep me company there. We shall see. I stroke her strange, shorter hair back from her face. "You know this is only for a short time, my No-rah. There will be long days on end in the brutal season in which we can spend all day in our furs together."

"I know." She gives me a slow smile. "I know we have to prepare for winter, and that there's a lot of work now so we're safe later. But

for now, you need a day of rest, and I need my mate at my side. We can take it one day at a time.”

I nod slowly. “One day, then.” Maybe she is right. I do like the thought of spending a day lounging, my mate and daughters at my side. We will nap and play, and then I will return to hunting to make sure my family is safe and fed.

But tonight? Tonight is ours. I look over at my No-rah’s flushed face and the need to claim her stirs once more. I slide a hand to her backside and grip it, and then my fingers stroke between her legs, finding her damp, slick core. She gasps when I stroke a finger inside her and her arms tighten around my neck. “Again already?”

“Making up for lost time,” I tell her, and then neither of us speaks again for a long while.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Some of you might be surprised to see another short story before the next full-length book. I am definitely working on BARBARIAN'S TOUCH but (as I've complained about on Facebook), it wasn't flowing. I'd write a page, delete it, switch characters, and try again. Round peg, meet square hole.

So I consulted my character list and thought I might do a bit of a writing exercise with another pair. Immediately, Nora & Dagesh popped into my head. I can only imagine how difficult it is to have twins, and add that into the grueling environment of the ice planet? I can imagine that a new mom (times two) would struggle. I also wanted to delve a bit more into Asha's story, because there are always two sides to everything. How would it feel if you were special, and then one day...suddenly not?

The story flowed like water and I hope you enjoyed it. Even better, we're now rolling on BARBARIAN'S TOUCH. Yay!

Also, a special thank you to Marlana Maier for the name suggestion for Ariana and Zolaya's baby!

THE PEOPLE OF ICE PLANET BARBARIANS

As of the end of ICE ICE BABIES

(suggested pronunciations in parenthesis)

AT THE MAIN TRIBAL CAVE

CAVE 1

VEKTAL (VEHK-TALL) - THE CHIEF OF THE SA-KHUI. MATED TO GEORGIE.

GEORGIE – HUMAN WOMAN (AND UNOFFICIAL LEADER OF THE HUMAN FEMALES). HAS TAKEN ON A DUAL-LEADERSHIP ROLE WITH HER MATE.

TALIE (TAH-LEE) – THEIR BABY DAUGHTER.

CAVE 2

MAYLAK (MAY-LACK) – TRIBE HEALER. MATED TO KASHREM AND CURRENTLY PREGNANT WITH CHILD.

KASHREM (CASH-REHM) - HER MATE, ALSO A LEATHER-WORKER.

ESHA (ESH-UH) – THEIR YOUNG DAUGHTER.

CAVE 3

SEVVAH (SEV-UH) – TRIBE ELDER, MOTHER TO AEHAKE, ROKAN,
AND SESSAH

OSHEN (AW-SHEN) – TRIBE ELDER, HER MATE

SESSAH – (SES-UH) - THEIR YOUNGEST SON

ROKAN – (ROW-CAN) – THEIR OLDEST SON. ADULT MALE HUNTER.

CAVE 4

WARREK (WAR-EHK) – TRIBAL HUNTER.

EKLAN (EHK-LAN) – HIS FATHER. ELDER.

CAVE 5

EREVEN (AIR-UH-VEN) HUNTER, MATED TO CLAIRE

CLAIRE – MATED TO EREVEN, CURRENTLY PREGNANT

CAVE 6

LIZ – RAAHOSH'S MATE AND HUNTRESS. CURRENTLY PREGNANT
FOR A SECOND TIME.

RAAHOSH (RAH-HOSH) – HER MATE. A HUNTER AND BROTHER TO
RUKH.

RAASHEL (RAH-SHEL) – THEIR DAUGHTER.

CAVE 7

STACY – MATED TO PASHOV. MOTHER TO PACY, A BABY BOY.

PASHOV (PAH-SHOWV) – SON OF KEMLI AND BORRAN, BROTHER
TO FARLI AND SALUKH. MATE OF STACY, FATHER TO PACY.

PACY – THEIR INFANT SON.

CAVE 8

NORA – MATE TO DAGESH, MOTHER TO TWINS ANNA AND ELSA.
DAGESH (DAH-ZZHESH) (THE G SOUND IS SWALLOWED) – HER
MATE. A HUNTER.

ANNA & ELSA – THEIR INFANT TWIN DAUGHTERS.

CAVE 9

HARLOW – MATE TO RUKH. 'MECHANIC' TO THE ELDERS' CAVE.
SPENDS 75% OF HER TIME THERE WITH HER FAMILY.

RUKH (ROOKH) – FORMER EXILE AND LONER. ORIGINAL NAME
MAARUKH. (MAH-ROOKH). BROTHER TO RAAHOSH. MATE TO HARLOW.
RUKHAR (ROO-CAR) – THEIR INFANT SON.

CAVE 10

MEGAN – MATE TO CASHOL. MOTHER TO NEWBORN HOLVEK.
CASHOL – (CASH-AWL) – MATE TO MEGAN. HUNTER. FATHER TO
NEWBORN HOLVEK.

HOLVEK – (HAUL-VEHK) – WEE BLUE BABY BOY!

CAVE 11

MARLENE (MAR-LENN) – HUMAN MATE TO ZENNEK. HAS UNNAMED
CHILD. FRENCH.

ZENNEK – (ZEHN-ECK) – MATE TO MARLENE. HAS UNNAMED
CHILD.

CAVE 12

ARIANA – HUMAN FEMALE. MATE TO ZOLAYA. MOTHER TO ANALAY.
ZOLAYA (ZOH-LAY-UH) – HUNTER AND MATE TO ARIANA. FATHER TO
ANALAY.

ANALAY – (AH-NUH-LAY) – THEIR INFANT SON.

CAVE 13

TIFFANY – HUMAN FEMALE. MATED TO SALUKH AND NEWLY PREGNANT.

SALUKH - SALUKH (SAH-LUKE) – HUNTER. SON OF KEMLI AND BORRAN, BROTHER TO FARLI, PASHOV AND DAGESH.

CAVE 14

AEHAKO – (EYE-HA-KOH) – ACTING LEADER OF THE SOUTH CAVE. MATE TO KIRA, FATHER TO KAE. SON OF SEVAH AND OSHEN, BROTHER TO ROKAN AND SESSAH.

KIRA – HUMAN WOMAN, MATE TO AEHAKO, MOTHER OF KAE. WAS THE FIRST TO BE ABDUCTED BY ALIENS AND WORE AN EAR-TRANSLATOR FOR A LONG TIME.

KAE (KI –RHYMES WITH ‘FLY’) – THEIR NEWBORN DAUGHTER.

CAVE 15

KEMLI – (KEMM-LEE) FEMALE ELDER, MOTHER TO SALUKH, PASHOV AND FARLI

BORRAN – (BORE-AWN) HER MATE, ELDER

FARLI – (FAR-LEE) THEIR TEENAGE DAUGHTER. HER BROTHERS ARE SALUKH AND PASHOV. SHE HAS A PET DVISTI NAMED CHAHM-PEE (CHOMPY).

CAVE 16

DRAYAN (DRY-ANN) – ELDER.

DRENOL (DREE-NOWL) – ELDER.

CAVE 17

VADREN (VAW-DREN) – ELDER.

VAZA (VAW-ZHUH) – WIDOWER AND ELDER. LOVES TO CREEP ON THE LADIES.

CAVE 18

ASHA (AH-SHUH) – MATED TO HEMALO. NO LIVING CHILD.
HEMALO (HEE-MAH-LO) – MATED TO ASHA.

CAVE 19

BEK – (BEHK) – HUNTER.
HASSEN (HASS-EN) – HUNTER.
HARREC (HAIR-EK) – HUNTER.
TAUSHEN (TOW –RHYMES WITH COW- SHEN) – HUNTER.

CAVE 20

JOSIE – HUMAN WOMAN. MATED TO HAEDEN AND NEWLY PREGNANT.

HAEDEN (HI-DEN) – HUNTER. PREVIOUSLY RESONATED TO ZALAH BUT SHE DIED (ALONG WITH HIS KHUI) IN THE KHUI-SICKNESS BEFORE RESONANCE COULD BE COMPLETED. NOW MATED TO JOSIE.

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<3 RUBY

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