

ICE
PLANET
BARBARIANS

author of Ice Planet Barbarians

RUBY DIXON

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HOLIDAY

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The Ice Planet Barbarians Series

NEED MORE ALPHA, OUT OF THIS WORLD HEROES?

NEED MORE ALIEN HOLIDAYS?

WANT MORE ICE BARBARIANS?

GEORGIE

I wake up to the drag of a ridged tongue along my ear. Vektal's hand carefully cups one of my breasts, large and tender with pregnancy.

"Mmm," I sigh, snuggling deeper under the furs with him. It's good to be the chief's mate, it really is. Every morning, I get woken up to a licking or nibbling of some kind. Today it's my ear. Yesterday it was my pussy. All of it is equally sinfully delicious and makes a girl look forward to her day.

I don't even mind the whole 'ice planet' thing and the 'having to wear fur and leather' thing if it gets me a sexy beast like Vektal.

I roll over and slide into his arms, nuzzling against his throat. My big, pregnant belly gets in the way of things, but Vektal's large enough that he can still envelop me against him. "Is it morning already?" I ask, sleepy.

"It is." He nips at my jaw. "Is my mate hungry for food? Or for her male?"

"Little from column A, little from column B?" I reach up and smooth my hand along one of the horns jutting from his forehead and curling back against his hair. He gets wild when I stroke his horns. Maybe it's the mental image that does it for him; I've never asked how much feeling he has there because I don't have horns. I'm as human as can be.

Sometimes I'm still amazed we ended up together, seeing as how we both are from different corners of the universe, and we're both stranded, but that's a story for another day. Right now I just want my

man. Vektal's hand smooths down my hip, and he pulls me against his cock, letting me know that he's been awake for several minutes, thinking about sex.

I can't blame him - I tend to think about sex more than I probably should. It's hard not to when your mate is so good at it.

It's at least an hour later when my mate and I emerge from our cave. I smooth out my hair, always a little self-conscious that everyone can guess what we've been doing just by my expression. No one pays a bit of attention to us, though, and it's just another ice planet morning. The sa-khui - Vektal's people - don't differentiate between days of the week, and they don't have holidays. There are only two sorta-seasons here - the bitter season and the brutal season. Both have entirely too much snow. Harlow tells me she keeps a calendar because otherwise her days run together and it bothers her. It's not a bad idea, and I'm tempted to go get the marked-bone calendar out of her empty cave and borrow it. She won't mind; she's currently at the ancestors' ship.

I want to count the days. Maybe then it'll help me deal with the fact that this damn baby isn't in any hurry to get here.

Vektal toys with a lock of my hair and then gently tugs on it, dragging my wandering attention back to him. "You are far away in your thoughts," he tells me. There's a look of concern in his glowing blue eyes. "Is it the kit?"

I pat my bloated stomach. "No, he's fine today." As if wanting to disagree with that statement, the baby kicks me right in the girl parts, and I wince. He seems to kick me there a lot lately, and it sucks. "Just hungry."

My mate's face brightens. "Tell me what you want to eat and I'll get it for you."

I shrug. "Just whatever, babe." It all disagrees with my pregnant stomach.

Vektal watches me, then puts his hands on my shoulders. It's kind of like being grabbed by two baseball mitts, his hands are so big. "I worry about you, my Georgie."

"I'm fine, I promise," I tell him. I'm just ultra-grumpy that the baby in my stomach seems to be cemented there. It doesn't feel like it's moving at all, and I'm so tired of being pregnant. Pretty sure I've

been pregnant for at least fourteen months now, because the sa-khui carry longer than humans. At this point? It's almost like torture. I'm not one of those 'easy' pregnancy girls like Liz, who barely had a baby belly and had hers two weeks ago. Nope. I'm one of those 'barf at everything and bloat like a whale' pregnant types. The type that cries at the drop of a hat.

Heck, I feel like crying now, and nothing's wrong.

Vektal pulls me against him and presses a kiss to my forehead. "I shall go hunt you a quill-beast for your meal. Will that make your stomach happy?"

The only thing that would make my stomach happy right now is a 'vacancy' sign going up, but I give him a smile. "That sounds great."

He nods, releases me, and heads off to grab his hunting gear. It gives him something to do and it will let me get out my whining before he comes back. I've been awful the last few months, and I worry he's going to wake up one day and boot my human ass out of his cave for being such a jerk. And then I cry until I barf, because that's apparently what I do when I'm pregnant.

The other humans are near the center of the cave, by the bathing pool. I see Nora (pregnant), Stacy (pregnant), Liz (nursing her cute little Raashel), Ariana (pregnant and annoying), and Megan (pregnant). Marlene must be sleeping in. I waddle my way over there, wincing when the baby kicks me in the girl parts again. Me and this baby need to have a talk, seriously. I sit down in my regular spot next to Nora, wincing.

She eyes my stomach. "You still haven't dropped."

"Thanks for the cheerful reminder," I tell her dryly.

"Stacy has," she says, excitement in her voice. Stacy gets up to show us all, and indeed, it seems as if her belly is quite a bit lower than yesterday. She caresses it, beaming a happy smile. So Stacy will be the next one to give birth.

I hate how jealous I am. "Lucky," I say, and hope it doesn't come out as sullen as it feels. I was the first one to get knocked up. How come I'm not the first one to give birth?

"You look like someone pissed in your Cheerios," Liz observes, pulling Raashel away from her breast and then burping her.

"I wish I had Cheerios," I say grumpily.

“Awww,” Liz mocks. “Does someone need to hold a baby to feel better?”

I put my arms out. “Yes. Gimme.” I never resist a chance to hold Raashel. She’s the cutest little mite. Harlow’s baby Rukhar isn’t here, and if I’m being honest, he’s not as cute as Raashel. He was born early and is still a little small. Raashel, however, is plump and always smiling.

Ironic, given her parents are two of the moodiest people ever.

I hold the baby and we all coo over her tiny toes and her little horn-buds. Raashel has a ton of thick black hair that clings to her scalp. She doesn’t have a tail, and she’s a lot pinker than Rukhar, and I wonder how my own baby will look.

“You know, if you want to watch her for a few hours, I wouldn’t mind going out and getting some hunting in.” Liz looks excited at the thought. “I won’t go far. Just close to the caves and check a few trap lines. I haven’t been in weeks.”

I tap Raashel’s teeny tiny nose, where I can see the barest hint of sa-khui ridges coming in. “Has it really been weeks since she was born?”

“Fuck if I know,” Liz says. “Where’s that calendar of Harlow’s?”

“In her cave? But it doesn’t do any good if she’s not here to update it.” Harlow has a tiny chip that she moves from one notch to the next to count the days. “And she and Rukh are going to be at the ancestors’ cave for a bit longer, I think.”

“I need to make my own calendar,” Stacy complains. “I can’t get over not having days of the week.”

“You know what I miss?” Megan chimes in, splashing her feet in the wading pool. Her ankles are swollen with her pregnancy, something I’ve had a lot of experience with. “I miss holidays.”

“Oh man, me too,” Liz says, leaning back instead of heading off to hunt. “I loved me some Thanksgiving.”

“Valentines’ Day for me.” Megan giggles. “Just because of all the chocolate. God, I really want chocolate lately.”

My mouth waters at the thought. Sweets aren’t something the ice planet has in abundance. Or at all. “Chocolate sounds amazing.”

“I miss Christmas,” Stacy says with a dreamy expression on her face. “I see all this snow and every day it makes me think of

Christmas songs.”

Megan leans forward, excited. “We should celebrate Christmas!”

Nora snorts. “Girl, I’m Jewish.”

“Oh.” Megan frowns. “Sorry.”

“A holiday does sound nice,” I agree, wistful. I love the thought of a big celebration. It’s not even the presents or the food, it’s just the idea of something to look forward to. I look over at Stacy as she takes a bite of dried rations - heavily spiced - and think maybe a meal isn’t so bad, after all. “I think we should have a holiday. Not a specific one like Christmas, but we could bring in elements of all the holidays we miss and just have one great big non-denominational holiday. Like...” I cast around for an idea. “Landing day!”

“We crashed, we didn’t land,” Liz points out.

I rock Raashel in my arms. “I thought you were going hunting?”

“Not when I can stay and shoot down all your ideas,” she says cheekily. She crosses her legs and props her chin on one hand, thinking. “So kind of like Christma-kwanz-akkuh? What if we call it, like...I don’t know. Resonance day?”

“Not everyone resonated,” I point out to her. “I’d love to bring both caves together for the celebration. Get everyone together.”

“I would love to see Kira and Tiff and the others,” Nora agrees.

“Unity Day,” Megan calls out. “We can celebrate both caves coming together and both humans and sa-khui coming together! It’ll be like Thanksgiving, but no one’s going to take over someone else’s land.” She wiggles her eyebrows. “And we can add a tree and some presents and a feast to the mix.”

Everyone’s getting excited at the thought, me included. I stroke Raashel’s fat little cheek, my mind on babies. Maybe mine will come before the big Unity Day celebration. “I think it sounds great.” When everyone’s silent, I look up and see all eyes turned to me. “What?”

“You’re the chief’s mate,” Stacy points out. “You might need to convince him that it’s a good idea.”

More titters rise from the group. “Convincing,” Liz hoots. “Like she doesn’t ‘convince’ his ass on a regular basis.”

She’s not wrong about that. I smirk at her. “I’ll see what I can do.”



I DON'T GET to talk to Vektal until later that night. He delivers a fresh kill to me just in time for lunch, and then quickly heads back out for more hunting. The winter - sorry, the brutal season - was harsh and there were days that no one could leave the caves to hunt because of fierce snowstorms. That meant eating the food that was stocked, and with the extra twelve mouths to feed, it was enough for everyone, but *just* enough. Now that the weather is nicer, Vektal and the hunters have been spending a lot of their time hunting to replenish supplies and prepare for the next winter. Since me and the pregnant girls can't do much, we sit around and sew baby clothes out of leather.

Or at least we try to. Maylak's really the only one that's good at working the leather into something that resembles baby clothing. The rest of us fumble with bone awls and sinew and do our best. I'm the worst at it, but I also have a baby coming that will need something to wear. Maylak's own toddler, Esha, tends to run around naked, but humans are more sensitive to the cold than the sa-khui, so we have to assume our children will be, too.

By the time Vektal makes it back to the cave for the evening, I've retired back to our cave and have been picking out crooked stitches by tallow candle-light. I might be weeping in frustration at how bad I am at sewing. Just a little. But when Vektal comes home, I dry my tears and put on a bright smile for him, because I feel like he shouldn't come home to a pregnant, crying, miserable mate. Not when he and his hunters work so hard to make us humans happy and keep us safe. "Hi baby," I say brightly and put away the sewing. "How was the day's hunt?"

"Very good," he tells me. "We slaughtered many dvisti. The elders are butchering them for drying as we speak." He leans in and kisses my head, and he smells like sweat and dried blood.

"Yum yum," I comment dryly. "Have you eaten? There's some stew left." Liz is a big fan of stew with dried meat and root vegetables.

He makes a face and flops down on the ground near my stool, wrapping his arms around my belly and resting on my legs. "I ate

while on the hunt. How is our kit today?”

I play with his sweaty hair, stroking it back from his face. My heart squeezes with love and I can't get over how much I adore this man. He looks tired tonight, and his horn is jabbing into my stomach, but I don't care. He looks like he is exhausted, and I want to comfort him. “The same as usual. Kicking me in all your favorite parts. Not ready to be born yet.”

Vektal chuckles. “Stubborn. Just like his mother.”

“And his father,” I point out pertly. He's got a bit of dried blood on his cheek and I absently rub at it. “You're dirty.”

“I should bathe.” He doesn't get up from his place nestled against my lap, though.

“I could help you with that.” I trail my fingers over his jaw and then down his neck. “Want a...” There's no word in their language for 'sponge bath'. “...Wipe down? From your mate?”

He rumbles low in his chest and his hands squeeze my buttocks. “If you wipe down your mate, you might find he's less tired than you think, my resonance.”

A warning about arousing him? Challenge accepted. “I find my mate is never as tired as I think,” I tease, and lightly trace his ear. “So is that a yes? If so, I'll need you naked.”

Vektal sits up and gives me a heated look. Then, he gets to his feet and heads to the front of the small nook that's our personal cave and puts the large leather privacy screen in front of the cave mouth. If there's one thing the sa-khui respect, it's a privacy screen in front of a cave. We might as well be on another planet with that thing in front of the cave entrance, and it's good, because I'm about to get frisky on my mate.

As I get to my feet, I head for one of the water-skins organized on a wall peg hung off of a bit of rock. By the time I pour it into a carved bone bowl, my mate is completely naked, his vest and hunting equipment shucked, his leggings torn off in his haste to please me. He stands there with his hands on his tight, narrow hips, and I admire the sight before me. He's seven feet of blue, suede-like skin over rippling muscles, with proud horns on his head and long, silky black hair that I love to feel falling around me when he covers me.

I'm the luckiest woman on the planet.

I crush a few soap berries into the bowl, then wet the bit of cloth. He approaches me, leaning in and trying to kiss me. I put a hand to his chest, teasing. “Clean up first.”

He grunts agreement, hands dropping down to his sides.

“Turn around for me?”

Vektal does, and I’m treated to a view of broad shoulders bunching with muscle and the most delicious, taut backside ever. And a tail, of course, long and slim like a cat’s with a tuft on the end. It moves when he’s agitated, and right now it’s slowly flicking back and forth. That means he’s in predator mode....which means he’s thinking about how to pounce on me.

This is probably going to be the world’s shortest sponge bath.

I’m totally okay with that.

I swipe the wet fabric over his shoulders, trying to be quick and efficient. But I can’t help but be distracted by strong shoulders and two dimples at the base of his spine, just above his tail. My hands get slower and my fingers trace the rivulets of water that glide down his suede-like skin. I love touching this man.

He turns and reaches out to caress my breasts as I wipe him down. “Is this another human tradition? If so, it is a wonder that your males ever leave the furs.”

“Humans have lots of traditions,” I tell him as I smooth the wet cloth over his pectorals and down the ridges covering his breastbone. Now’s as good a time as ever to segue into what the others want me to ask. “Like holidays.”

“Haw-ee-dehz?” Vektal forms his mouth around the word and then frowns. “What is this?”

“It’s a day that we put aside to celebrate things.” I dip the cloth into the water again and then smooth it down his arm. He’s being distracting, teasing my nipple while I bathe him, but I need to bring this up. “Like Christmas is a day that we celebrate family.” I neglect the religion aspect. “We give each other gifts to show that we care, and we decorate a tree to make the home special, and we cook big feasts. And then there’s mistletoe and stockings—“

“What are these things?”

“Mistletoe is a plant. You hang it from the doorway—“

“Because it smells good?” he prompts.

“Well, no, it doesn’t smell like anything.”

“It...tastes good? And you hang it to remind yourself?”

“Actually I think it’s poison.”

He frowns. “This sounds foolish to me.”

“It’s what it represents,” I tell him, slapping the cloth against his chest with a bit more irritation. “It’s about showing your woman that you care for her.”

“By poisoning her?”

“You don’t poison her!” I swat him with the cloth. “You hold the mistletoe over her head and kiss her.”

“Why do I need poison when I can just do this?” He leans in and presses his mouth to mine. His tongue brushes against my upper lip and he gently kisses me. Hard to believe that this man didn’t know what a kiss was a short time ago. He’s far too good at it now. It makes me weak in the knees and I forget all about bathing him. When he pulls back, I’m clinging to him. He’s got a smug look on his face now. “I did not need to poison you for that kiss.”

The urge to stuff the wet cloth in his smiling mouth is overwhelming. I scowl at him and fling the cloth down in the bowl. “You know what? Forget I brought any of it up. Just forget it.”

I turn my back to him and cross my arms. I would stomp to the other end of the cave, but ours is a tiny one, and there’s not a lot of maneuvering to be had. I know I’m being unreasonable and hormonal, but I’m on the verge of crying. He’s mocking me and all I’m trying to do is to get him to see that we humans miss some of the aspects of our old life.

A moment later, Vektal puts his hands on my shoulders. He leans in and kisses my cheek. “This is important to you, my mate?”

“We just wanted to have a holiday,” I say, and hate that I’m sniffing. “A celebration. Something to look forward to.”

“Is this why you wished to bathe me? To coax your mate to see things your way?” He nips at my jaw.

I snuggle back against him. “Not really. I just like touching you.”

He chuckles, and I feel the rumble of it blend into the purr of his khui. His hands slide around to my front and he caresses my breasts. “My mate, you know you shall have whatever you desire.

You know this, yes? You could ask for my horns to be cut from my head and I would gladly do so if it would make you smile.”

“I like your horns,” I tell him, and then suck in a breath when his fingers tease my nipples. “Oh, I like that, too.”

He pushes his hips against my backside and I feel the hard thrust of his cock against my bottom. “You like everything I do to you, Georgie, my mate.”

Oh, I do. I really, really do. I suck in a breath of anticipation as he leads me to what has now become our favorite wall. Being hugely pregnant means you get a bit more creative with sex, and lately our favorite position has been with me standing braced against a wall, my palms flat against it as he enters me from behind. I place my hands against the rock wall of the cave and push my butt out a little, just because my body’s ungainly and plump and a nice butt is about all I have going for me right now.

And Vektal loves my butt. He caresses it, playing with the rounded globes before sliding a hand between my legs. His fingers stroke over my pussy, and I moan. I’m already hot and wet for him, and his fingers slick through my folds before moving to play with my clit.

I whimper and my fingers curl against the rock. “I want you inside me, Vektal.”

“Soon, my resonance,” he says in that deep, sexy voice of his. I shiver as his finger presses against my clit and he kisses my shoulder. Instead of settling himself between my spread legs, I feel him kiss down my back, then caress my ass again. When he kisses one buttock, I begin to tremble, because I know what’s coming next. And I can’t wait.

He pushes my legs further apart and I obediently spread for him, just in time for his tongue to glide over the wet folds of my pussy. Oh God, he’s eating me out from behind. I love it when my mate gets dirty. My moans grow louder as the ridges of his tongue stroke deep into my core, over and over again. I’m so wet that I can hear him lapping up my juices, and the feel of him there, his horns pressing into my ass as he mouths me from behind?

I wouldn’t trade all of Earth for this.

Big fingers stroke my clit even as his tongue thrusts into me again, and I shatter with a small cry of release. He knows just how to touch me to drive me to the brink in no time, and I'm not ashamed to say that I come fast and hard whenever he touches me. He just makes sure that I come repeatedly. My brain's in a fog as he strokes my clit, petting me through the rest of my orgasm, his tongue gliding over my folds. It's like he can't get enough of my taste, ever. Small shudders of pleasure move through me and I whimper again. If he keeps this up, he's going to lick me right on through to another orgasm.

Not that I'm complaining.

But a moment later, he kisses my buttock again and murmurs my name, and then I feel his large body pressing against mine. He grabs a handful of my hair and exposes my neck, then leans in and scrapes his teeth against my throat. I shiver with pleasure, because as much as I love him eating me out? I love it when he manhandles me, too.

"My mate," he growls low in my ear as his cock pushes against my entrance. "My Georgie."

The noise that comes out of me when he sinks deep? There's no word for it in the English language. Or in the sa-khui one. It sounds like a strangled groan that ends in a half-scream. He just feels so damn good that I can't stay quiet. His cock thrusts into me, and I feel his spur push against my back entrance when he pushes all the way in. Every thrust is dual pleasure, and I find myself pressing back against him so each time he rocks into me, it's a little rougher.

By the time I'm coming? He's got a hand over my mouth to muffle the fact that I'm screaming his name. He's quieter than me when he comes. My name is a mere hiss on his breath when I feel his hot seed empty inside me. He shudders against my body, then bites my shoulder gently. "Mine," he growls again, and my body shivers with delight at how possessive he is.

"All yours," I agree, breathless and sweaty.

Vektal pulls me against him with infinite tenderness, kissing my shoulder and neck where he was biting it moments ago. Then, he smooths my hair, gets the washcloth I'd used on him, and wipes

away any traces of his come from my thighs. After caring for my body, he pulls me down into bed with him, and I go gladly.

“So tell me more about this poison *haul-day*,” he insists.

I groan. “Just forget it.”

“I wish to make this happen for you,” he tells me, and kisses my brow. “Can any plant be used? Or must it be poison?”

“Mistletoe was just the tradition,” I tell him. Truth be told, I don’t know why mistletoe is used, either. “We could even use the leaves of the soap-berry plant.” It’s easily recognizable, grows like crazy, and has bright red berries instead of mistletoe’s white. Close enough.

Vektal nods thoughtfully. “So males can kiss their mates and remind them they need to wash.”

A horrified giggle escapes me. “I think the meaning of the holiday is eluding you, babe.”

“Then tell me more.”

So I do. I tell him about giving gifts, and surprising people. I tell him about white elephant gift exchanges, which he really doesn’t get. “Why would you give someone something that is not useful?” he asks over and over again, and my answer of “Because it’s funny?” doesn’t exactly hold water for him. I move on to other holidays instead, telling him what I know of Hanukkah (mostly from Adam Sandler songs), Thanksgiving (which he understands a little more), and Valentine’s Day. He’s intrigued by that one especially, and the courting aspects.

“And you wish to celebrate all of these?” he asks me. “At once?”

“No, I was thinking just one holiday. A new one we can all celebrate together.” I trace my finger down the ridges on his chest. “Get both caves together, have a feast, exchange presents, and just, you know, be happy we’re all alive and healthy.”

“And no poison?”

“No poison,” I agree firmly.

“Then we shall do a no-poison day just for you, my Georgie.” He kisses me again. “I will send a runner out to Aehako’s caves tomorrow morning.”

“And don’t forget Harlow and Rukh at the ancestors’ cave,” I tell him. “We’ll want to bring them in, too.” I’m looking forward to seeing

Harlow and her baby again, more than I'd like to admit. I kind of have babies on the brain.

He nods. "I will go and get them myself."

Wait, what? The ancestors' cave will be at least a day's travel there, and one back. He is going to leave me? What if I have the baby between now and then? "I'm going with you."

Vektal scoffs. "You cannot walk that far."

"You can pull the sled that they used to cart Harlow around after Rukhar was born." When the tribe was hunting for a sa-kohtsk for Rukhar's symbiont, Harlow hadn't been able to keep up, so they'd dragged her along on a little sled. She said it was a nice ride. Vektal's definitely strong enough to pull me along, and the more I think about the idea, the more I like it. It'll keep us together.

His hand moves to my belly, and it's clear we're thinking the same thing. "And our kit?"

"If it comes while we're there, the computer has medical equipment." He grunts and I roll my eyes. I don't get their aversion to everything mechanical. Over the last year, we've tried suggesting small introductions of things into the tribe that we could salvage from the ancestors' ship, but Vektal and his people are wary of all technology, to the point that they'd rather walk two days on a broken leg back to the healer than trust the medical bay in the ancestors' ship. I've resigned myself to a primitive life, but I'm willing to use the computer as leverage if it means Vektal doesn't leave my side. "Besides, feel my stomach. That baby's lodged in there firmly. He's not going anywhere. He hasn't even turned yet."

As if to prove this point, the baby kicks my girl parts again.

Vektal strokes my stomach, thoughtful. And since I'm a little manipulative, I stroke other parts of him until he agrees.

It's a win/win situation, really.

CLAIRE

Not like that,” Bek snarls in my ear as he pulls the flint scraper out of my hand. “You’re doing it wrong again. It’s like you don’t want to learn.”

“Of course I do,” I say meekly, getting to my feet and abandoning the hide I’ve been working on. “I’m not trying to make you angry.”

He huffs in exasperation and I glare at the back of his head as he sits in my spot and begins to vigorously re-scrape the hide. “You’re going to ruin all of my furs again, Claire.”

You’re doing it wrong, Claire. You’re a fool, Claire. You don’t think, Claire. Why must you always do things badly, Claire? I’ve heard the criticism over and over again for months now, and I’m so sick of it I could choke. I settle for mentally beaming laser-beams of hate at my ‘mate’.

Actually, he’s not my mate. We haven’t even resonated. I was just feeling super vulnerable when we landed here, and afraid. I thought they’d keep me safe if I latched onto a guy, and Bek was flattering and sweet at the time. Of course, that all changed when I moved into his cave and he became a control freak. Now I just want to get away from him and his smothering, controlling ways, but I can’t figure out how to break things off.

Other than in the furs, of course. I’ve made it clear for moons now that he’s not welcome in my bed. At least he takes good direction in that aspect. Every other aspect of my life, though, he is determined to handle...and ultimately be disappointed with.

He sighs as he scrapes the skin once more, then tosses the scraper aside. "I'll finish this later. Isn't there anything you're good at, Claire?"

I cross my arms over my chest and remain silent. I'm pretty good at picking out a jerk, I think, but I don't say it aloud. Bek hasn't started to hit me...yet. But I'm wary, because I see all the signs there. My mother was married to an abuser. Maybe that's why I gravitated to Bek; I recognized the type.

Sad that I can't even have a new beginning on a new planet.

There's a ruckus in the main part of the cavern, voices rising in excitement. I head to the front of our shared cave, curious. "What's going on?"

Bek pushes past me. "Stay here. I'll see what it is." I start to follow, and he turns and shakes his head at me, glaring. "I mean it, Claire. Stay."

For a moment, I contemplate it. He's in a foul mood and I don't want today to be the day to push him over the edge. Not when I don't know how to disentangle myself from this awkward situation. But a lot of the days here on Not-Hoth pass with a boring sameness, and I'm drawn to the excited chatter in the main cavern. Bek hates it when I hang out with the other humans. He feels threatened by them, probably because they don't like him. They never have.

Wish I'd paid attention to that.

I keep my expression meek as I tiptoe out of our shared cave and into the main cavern. I can hear Josie's loud voice over all of the others, and Tiffany's throaty laughter along with Kira's softer chuckle. My human friends. I miss them. I hate that Bek's hiding me away like I'm the ring and he's Gollum. Jerk. "My precious," I mock under my breath, and head toward the crowd. It's easy to duck behind a few taller people - I'm short and all of the sa-khui are gigantic.

It's a runner from the other cave. I rack my brain for a name and come up with Ereven. I remember him. He always had a friendly smile for humans but kept mostly to himself. His horns are less curled than most and arch over his head, and his hair has been lopped to shoulder length in a messy chop, as if he can't be bothered with the ornate braids that most sa-khui favor. His friendly grin

creases his face as Josie hops in front of him, bouncing around like a jumping bean.

“What’s going on?” Bek demands as he strides forward. A few others move away, just because he’s abrasive to be around.

Aehako claps him on the shoulder, smiling. “We are going to have a No-Poison Day!”

“Holiday,” Josie corrects, bursting into hoots of laughter. “Every day is no-poison day.”

Bek just frowns as if displeased, and shrugs Aehako’s hand off. I know it bothers him that Aehako - who is one of the younger hunters in the tribe - is leader of the second cave. But Aehako makes a good leader because he’s approachable and friendly and still gets things done. Bek? He’s not any of those things.

Bek’s also jealous that Aehako and Kira resonated *after* becoming a couple. I haven’t resonated to him, so it’s just another one of my failures.

“It’s a holiday,” Josie babbles. She’s always talking. She slings an arm around Tiffany’s shoulders and grins. “With food and presents and we can take one of those pink trees and make a Charlie Brown Christmas tree, and—“

Tiffany claps a hand over Josie’s constantly-moving mouth. “She says she’s excited.”

Everyone laughs except Bek.

“Well, you are all invited,” Ereven says. “Vektal wants us all back at the main caves.”

“There’s no room,” Bek says with a scowl.

“Come, friend,” Ereven’s voice is smooth and easy, unruffled in the face of Bek’s displeasure. “You know all will make room. We have in the past, and we can do so again. It will be good to have all faces in the main cavern once more.”

“We can do as before,” Aehako says. “The single women in one cave, the couples doubling up. They will just have to keep their cocks in their pants for an evening or two.”

Kira blushes and bats his arm as more laughter ripples through the cave. “Aehako!”

I’m excited, though. I love the thought of going back to the main cave for a few days. It’s nice here and more spacious, but I want to

see how Georgie and Megan and the others are doing. I want to hold the babies. I want to see everyone. Sometimes the others go and visit the main cave for a few days, but Bek never wants to. I've been here all year.

Bek grunts unhappily and glances back at our cave, where I'm supposed to be hiding instead of lurking behind Farli's much taller shoulders. "Claire and I are not going."

My heart sinks. I know he likes to control who I spend time with, but to keep me from the celebration? Hot tears rush to my eyes and I swipe my fingers on my cheeks, trying to be strong. It's just another disappointment. I'll get over it.

"Not going?" Josie bellows. "Why not?"

Everyone looks at Bek, and I'm both gratified and even more heartbroken to see that Kira, Tiffany, and Josie all look upset.

"There is no reason to go," Bek spits out. "There is work to be done! The brutal season was hard and we must store food for the next brutal season, not waste it on a feast to celebrate poison."

"What the hell is with this poison crap?" Tiffany mutters.

"You can't stop her from going!" Josie says again. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Haeden glare and stalk away. He's the only person in the caves more remote than Bek (and me by proxy) and he can't stand Josie and her loud ways. She makes another harrumphing noise. "That's bullshit!"

I smile to myself as I hear the cussword come out of her mouth. Josie likes to cuss in English because no one grasps it other than us. She has my back, and she's braver than I am for standing up to Bek.

"She's not going, and neither am I," Bek says.

I swipe another round of tears from my cheek, and as I do, I notice that Ereven is looking at me. I don't know how he's managed to see me through a sea of tall shoulders, but our eyes meet. His smile tugs a little wider, and the look he gives me is calm. Easy. As if everything is handled. And he turns to Bek and puts a hand on the hunter's shoulder.

"My friend, it was not a request. The chief wants *everyone* there for the celebration. No one's staying behind."

And just like that...I'm going. This time, when Ereven's gaze flicks back in my direction, I beam a smile at him. It's like we've got a

secret between us.
It feels nice.



EVEN THOUGH I have to walk next to Bek as we gather our traveling things and trek as a group back to the tribal caves, I don't mind. It allows me to be silent and to think.

Now's my chance. Now's the time I can make a clean break of things. If we're all crowding into the caves together, there won't be a lot of privacy. That means if I dump him, he won't be able to confront me. Not with everyone piled on top of one another. I can make a clean break and by the time we come back, his temper will have had time to simmer down.

And the only thing I feel right now? Relief. Utter relief. There's been no affection between us for months and months - or moons and moons - now, and all I feel is smothered resentment. Maybe he'd be a good mate to someone else...but not to me.

When we round the bend and the caves come into sight, someone gives a loud cry of greeting. Moments later, people flood out of the caves, trudging into the snow, and reunion after happy reunion is made. Georgie and Vektal are missing - gone to retrieve Harlow and her mate - but Megan is there, rounded with pregnancy, and Marlene, and Nora, and Ariana, and all the other girls that resonated. I'm enveloped in hug after hug, and not even Bek can interrupt this moment of joy. Everyone looks wonderful, and Liz is busy passing her baby to everyone to hold.

I catch a glimpse of an apple-face, dark hair, and tiny horn-nubs, and fall in love. "Can I hold her?" I ask, even though my back aches from carrying my pack all day.

"Of course!" She plucks the baby from Josie's arms and transfers it to mine. "Just not too close to the boobs or she's going to think it's feeding time."

"I don't think we'll have to worry about that," I joke, glancing down at my flat chest. Liz just chuckles. I hold Raashel close, smelling her sweet baby scent. She's warm and soft and so cuddly. I can't stand

it. I'm hit with a pang of baby fever so strong it surprises me, and I'm envious of all the other women, chatting and laughing and pregnant.

And happy. Everyone seems to be happy but me.

I carry the baby as the crowd slowly heads inside the tribal caverns. There're so many people talking that the voices are a dull roar, and it actually feels nice. Instead of overwhelming and crowded like Bek has been complaining about, I love it. It feels like family, like Thanksgiving and Christmas all rolled into one big party.

There's chatter about the holiday we're going to have. No one can decide on a name, though the aliens are calling it No-Poison Day for some reason. Nora refers to it as Thanks-Christmas-akkuh. A few days from now, there will be feasting, and presents, and games. Everyone's excited. I find I'm excited, too. Not about presents - I don't care about that. I'm excited to feel the warmth of family again, and I realize how lonely I've been over the last year, letting Bek quietly herd me away from everyone else.

Not again.

As I pass baby Raashel into Tiffany's waiting arms, I feel someone looking at me. I glance up, expecting to see Bek glaring, but he's off talking to hunters. Instead, it's Ereven, the hunter with the tangled hair and the smile that never seems to see a moment's anxiety. He gazes at me thoughtfully, as if he wants to say something. When I give him a challenging look, he just gives me that lazy smile and saunters away.

Weird.

I shrug off my pack and glance over at Bek's back. Still turned to me. Time to make my move. "Where are the bachelorettes sleeping?" I ask Liz.

"You guys are staying with me and Cashol," Megan says. Then she tilts her head. "You're not staying with Bek?"

"We're done," I whisper. "Can I put my stuff down now, please?"

"Of course." She puts a hand on my back and leads me toward her cave. Inside, I see baskets of furs and supplies, and an area that's been put aside for bedding. It only looks big enough for two, but I put my stuff down anyway. Josie and Tiffany won't mind. I unroll my furs and start to make my bed, my hands shaking. I'm so nervous

I'm sweating despite the cool air. I'm just waiting for him to notice that I'm not following at his heels like a puppy.

Josie drops down next to me, and Tiffany, and they're both chatting and oblivious to my panic. They set their furs down next to mine, and Tiffany starts to talk about holiday dinners and food she misses, when a bellow rises above all the voices in the cavern.

"Claire!"

I flinch. I don't get up, though.

Tiffany looks at me, and then immediately puts her bedroll against one side of mine. Josie does the same, and this way I'll be sandwiched between them. I'm so grateful for that small move that I could cry.

"Claire!" Bek bellows again, and Megan frowns, moving to the front of her cave. She pulls out the privacy screen, but before she can cover the doorway, Bek shoves his way in. He's enormous in the small cave, and I feel helpless as he glares at me. "There you are. Get your things. We're staying with Zolaya."

Silence falls. I don't get up. I lick my lips and stare down at my unrolled bed. "I'm not going with you." My voice is a whispery, fragile thing. I wish it were stronger, but I'm a chicken. When he doesn't move, I add, "I'm staying here with the unmated women."

"You're mated to me," he grits out.

"No, I'm not." I can't look him in the eye. I know I'm being a coward, but I don't want to hear more about how much I disappoint him, or how I can't do anything right. I've had enough.

Uncomfortable silence falls. No one moves. I'm not sure anyone knows what to do.

I feel like I should say more. After a moment, I suck in a breath, steel myself, and meet his gaze. "We didn't resonate. I don't want to be with you. We're done. I'm not yours. You can leave now."

He stares at me with hard eyes, as if waiting for me to crumble and change my mind. Waiting for me to meekly get my things and follow behind him like I have for the past year.

I don't.

Megan's mate, Cashol, steps forward and puts a hand on Bek's shoulder. "Come. Let's leave this for another day."

Bek glares at me a moment longer, then turns and storms away.
Tiffany rubs my back, offering silent support.
And just like that, I feel like I can breathe again.

GEORGIE

Something tickles my nose, and I swipe at it, yawning as I burrow further under the furs. The sled isn't the worst place to sleep, not by a long shot. The sides are curved and so I roll into the middle, which makes it perfect for curling up with a few pillows and napping.

Oh, who am I kidding? Nap? I've slept the entire trip. I've woken up once or twice to pee, but the rest of the time? Nap upon nap upon nap. My blankets have shifted, though, and my face is cold, so I try to press it under the furs again.

The thing tickles my nose once more.

I crack an eye open and stare at the sad, wilted plant touching my cheek. "What the fuck is that?"

From where he holds the twig of sickly-colored greenery, Vektal grins. "It is not poison! For the celebration. Now you will shower me with kisses, yes?"

I snort giggle to an upright position. "Something like that."

He gives me a wicked grin. "I will save my prize for later. For now, we are close to the ancestors' cave. Do you want to walk for a few?"

I yawn and stretch my legs, and then decide that I do. With his help, I get up from the sled and peer around. Sure enough, there's the solid, rounded hill of snow that covers the centuries-old spaceship that Vektal's ancestors arrived in. The cave 'mouth' is open, and the snow at the front is churned, which tells me that someone's been hunting recently. Vektal reaches for my hand and I link my four fingers with his three as we head toward it.

It's a short walk, and Vektal leaves the sled outside. I step into the ship, noticing that the debris has been cleaned out and swept from the front halls. In the distance, I can hear the clatter of metallic objects and the low murmur of voices. A baby wails, then is quickly silenced again.

They don't know we're here yet. I nudge Vektal. "We should call out to them." I have mental images of Harlow wielding a saw of some kind and then dropping it on her foot, all because we startle her.

Vektal cups his free hand to his mouth. "Rukh! Harlow! We have come!"

I wince as his booming voice reverberates off of the ship's narrow walls. "Thanks, babe."

Rukh emerges down one of the long halls a moment later, patting a tiny baby on one shoulder. He lifts his chin at us in acknowledgment. "They are here, Har-loh," he calls out, voice thickly accented. "You are right."

We head toward them and I hear the crash of metal, and Harlow's voice yelling something. My fingers itch to hold tiny Rukhar and I waddle forward, putting my arms out. "He's getting so big now!" He's still tiny as heck, but even a few weeks has made a difference.

Rukh gives me a wary look, holding his son close. After a moment, he reluctantly hands him over. I'm not offended. Rukh's still so new to people (other than Harlow) that I don't blame him for being wary. I take the baby from him as Vektal touches his shoulder in greeting.

Rukhar looks much like Raashel, but different. He's got a tail, bluish skin, and he's a lot tinier. He's a preemie, though, and I expect that. He's filled out since I last saw him and looks so good. His small face screws up at the sight of me and he bellows loudly, breaking into an angry cry.

Harlow emerges from deeper in the ship a moment later, a filthy leather apron over her tunic. She's got grease smudges on her face and her bright red hair is pulled into a messy bun on top of her head. She has metal bar that almost looks like a wrench in her hands. Her eyes widen. "What are you guys doing here? Is something wrong?"

I jiggle Rukhar, trying to ignore the fact that he's screaming at the sight of my face. My own baby kicks me in the girl parts again, and I

wince. “Nothing’s wrong.”

“We are having no-poison day!” my mate proudly declares. “Georgie has asked for it.”

Harlow’s brows draw together and she gives me a confused look. “Do what?”

“Christmas,” I explain to her. “The man hasn’t grasped the concept of mistletoe yet.” I reluctantly hand her baby over to her when he continues to scream, and she tucks him under her apron to feed. “We’re going to have a holiday. There’s no name for it yet. Just a quasi-Christmas Thanksgiving get together. To celebrate, um, stuff. And we want everyone to be there.”

“It sounds like fun,” she says, nibbling on her lip. She glances over at her mate. He’s not exactly good with people. I think that’s one reason why they were so quick to rush off to the ancestor caves once Harlow was able to travel. “The timing is good, too.”

“Are you done?” I ask. I know she’s been working on a stone cutter to try and increase our living quarters so we don’t have to split the tribe. It’s obsessed her since she came back.

Her face brightens and she nods. With one arm holding her baby to her breast, she waves me into her work area. “Let me show you!”

I follow her in and the room is a mess of metal parts. One of the walls has been torn open, wires hanging from a broken panel. It looks like she’s been scavenging, and there are metal bits and unexplainable parts over every flat surface in the room. In one corner, their furs are thrown together in a bed.

“Wow,” I say after a moment. “You’ve been busy.”

“Not really,” she tells me, pushing aside a few things and then pulling out a thin, rustling film that she spreads on a table. “The computer spits out all the information I need. I just put it together like a big jigsaw puzzle.” The baby at her chest hiccups, and she automatically hands him over to Rukh. The big sa-khui male takes the baby and begins to burp him, while Harlow closes her dress and then goes back to the chart. She gestures at one corner. “I’m almost done with this last part here. If I work through the night, I’m pretty sure I can get it done, and then we can all head back and try it out.”

“It works? Really?”

“Well, the laser part of it works.” She thumbs a gesture over a shoulder and I see a big burned hole near the ceiling. Oh. “I’m working on something that will lock it into place because right now it’s a wee bit...forceful.” She shrugs. “Worse comes to worst, we can strap it to one of the big guys and let ‘em rip in an area we know is safe.”

“Er, how do we know an area is safe?”

She snaps her fingers and rushes over to another table, picking up something that looks like a lunchbox studded with wires. “I made this!”

I study it for a moment, but I still don’t know what it is. “And what is that?”

“Sonar! It works like a stud finder.” She flips a switch and the thing whines, high pitched. “When we put this against a cave wall, it’ll send out electric pulses to determine if the wall is solid or if it’s hollow. If we can find some hollow areas behind the walls, it’ll be a lot easier to make the cave bigger. I don’t know how long the cutter will last.”

I’m impressed. “And you made all this?”

“Well, it’s just a matter of trying to make tools we had at home.” She blinks like it’s no big deal. “It won’t do any good if the walls of the cave are solid, but with all the water and melt activity here? I bet they’re not.”

“Okay, then. I’ll take your word for it.”

“So tell me more about the holiday?” she asks, turning off the whining ‘finder’ and setting it down. “Is there going to be cake?”

I groan at the thought. “I wish. I don’t think this planet has anything sweet at all.”

Harlow’s eyes narrow and she gives me a sly grin. “Just because we don’t know about anything doesn’t mean the computer doesn’t.”

CLAIRE

The tribal cave is in an absolute flurry of preparations. Josie has put herself in charge of decorations, and she’s picked out the saddest-looking pink flimsy tree for the center of the cave. Or close to the center, since the bathing pool is there. She’s put a white-fur tree skirt

around it and has enlisted the children - Farli, Esha, and Sessah - into helping her make bone ornament decorations. I've been stringing dried seeds from the *ja-feh* plant onto a line of sinew because they're pretty colors even if they do taste terrible. The tree's going to clack like nobody's business if a stiff breeze gets into the cavern, but it's about the spirit of things more than how pretty it is.

While the humans make decorations, the men hunt and everyone works secretly on gifts. The sa-khui are intrigued by the thought of giving each other furtive presents, and you can't walk through the main cavern without seeing someone scramble to hide something they're working on.

I do my best not to hide in Megan and Cashol's cave. For one, I'm tired of hiding. And there're so many people around that I can't help but be caught up in their happiness. Bek goes out and hunts early in the mornings and I'm left - happily - to myself. He hasn't confronted me, but I know the day is coming.

Vektal, Georgie, Harlow, and Harlow's strange mate Rukh return a day or two later and there're more greetings and happiness, even though Harlow's poor mate looks as if he wants to run away from all the noisy, excited people. I get to hold Harlow's baby Rukhar while she goes through the cave with a square 'finder' and makes marks on a 'schematic' she's drawn on a dvisti hide. She's found several places to widen the cavern, but doesn't want to do it with the caves full because it makes a lot of noise and a lot of smoke. Vektal has instructed her to wait until after Not-Poison Day. The strange holiday name is sticking, even though Georgie makes exasperated noises every time someone says it.

Late that night, Josie and I decide to make colorful paper chains. There's a plant that grows near the cave that releases papery sheaves of bark, and I paint them with green dye and red dye, both made from berries. Josie takes each one as it dries, turns it into a loop, and then sews it onto the chain. We want to string them around the doors to add to the festivity, plus it gives us something to do with our hands. Josie, Tiffany, and I are the only ones that don't really have a mate or a new family to care for, so there're no presents to be made. We've agreed not to give each other things, and are focusing on holiday decor instead.

I've just finished dabbing a bark-sheaf to a bright green shade when I feel someone stand behind me. "Claire. We must talk."

Bek. My stomach shrivels and my entire body freezes. I hunch my shoulders and don't get up. He can't do anything while I'm sitting in the main cavern, other than spit insults at me. Josie's eyes are wide as she looks at me, and I know it's going to be all over the caves in the morning, because Josie's a terrible gossip along with being a motormouth. "I'm busy," I say after a moment.

He throws something at me, and I blink at the pile of crushed leaves that land in my lap.

"Um, what's this?" I have to ask. I can't figure it out.

"That is your poison for a kiss," he says, voice surly. "Vektal says a male that presents his woman with leaves will receive a kiss from her."

I swat the leaves off of my lap. "I don't know what you're talking about, but I'm not going to kiss you. I'm not your woman. I don't want to be with you, and I don't want to talk to you right now. Just leave me alone."

"We need to talk. You belong to me."

"There's nothing to say, and *no*, I don't!" My courage is starting to fail because he's not backing down at all. It's hard to be strong, especially when it'd be so much easier to just cave and go meekly back to his furs. I get to my feet and brush off my lap. Even though I've told myself I don't want to hide in the caves, that's the only place I know he won't follow me.

I head toward Megan's cave when he grabs me by the elbow and starts to drag me along with him. His hand is big and his grip is tight, and I can't pull free.

"No," I hiss, but he ignores it and steers me toward his cave. I'm not in the mood to be yelled at for the next hour or two. I know if he berates me enough, I'll cave. I'm not strong, not like Georgie.

"Um?" Josie says in the background, a question in her voice.

"Do not interfere," Bek snarls back at her, and shoves me toward his cave.

I drag my feet, trying to pull myself free. Just as I'm about to be pushed into the cave, someone emerges from the next cave over.

It's Ereven, shrugging on a thick fur cloak. He looks surprised to see me and Bek, and then pauses.

I avert my face, ashamed that he's going to see me bullied by Bek.

"Are you ready for our walk, Claire?" Ereven asks.

I look over at him, surprised. Ereven's expression is calm, patient. He doesn't move, though. He doesn't blink when Bek snarls in irritation, either. "Yes," I blurt out. "Yes, I am."

"Good," he says, and moves in and gently wrests my arm from Bek's grasp. For a moment, I think they'll fight, but Bek stands down and storms his way into his cave. Ereven's grip is loose on my arm as he guides me toward the cave mouth. "Come, then."

The urge to flee into my bunk is overwhelming. I've never spent time with Ereven. I don't know him more than a casual passing in a group. Why's he helping me out? But he's helped me, and I don't want to repay his kindness with cowardice, so I nod and go outside with him.

Just a few steps into the night air and it's bitterly cold. A light snow is falling - when is it not? - and I'm not dressed for the weather. My simple leather tunic is lightweight, as are my leggings. I don't want to flee inside, so I tell my cootie to suck it up.

As if he can read my thoughts, Ereven shrugs off his heavy cloak and settles it on my shoulders. His eyes glow blue in the darkness. "Better?"

It smells like smoke and leather and its owner. It's kind of nice. I snuggle deeper down into it. "Yes, thank you."

We walk out into the night snow, feet crunching in the fresh powder. It takes a moment for my eyes to adjust to the dark, but both the Big Moon and the Little Moon are out, and I can soon see fairly well in the dark. His steps are slow and unhurried, and I do my best to match my smaller stride to him.

He's quiet. Not in a bad way, but as if he's not in a rush to give his opinions...unlike Bek. It's nice, because I'm rather quiet myself, and being around Bek just made me retreat further into my shell. "Thank you," I say after a moment. "For saving me back there."

Ereven nods slowly. "Does he hurt you? Say the word and I will speak to Vektal about his actions."

“No. He’s just...angry. I told him we’re not together anymore. Actually, I don’t think we’ve been together for a long time, but he doesn’t like to believe it.” My breath huffs out into a frozen puff of laughter.

“Not mates?”

“Not for a long time.” My cheeks heat. I have no idea why I volunteered that, but the sa-khui don’t have the same sense of shame around sex that humans do. It’s no big deal for someone to comment on their sex life, or lack thereof. Still, I feel the need to explain even more, to somehow seem less fickle in his eyes. “We haven’t shared furs in several months.”

“Surprising.”

I snort. “Not to me. I’d rather sleep.”

There’s a soft, low sound and it takes me a moment to realize he’s chuckling. “Then clearly Bek needs practice.”

My cheeks feel hot despite the chill. “I didn’t mean—“

“Yes, you did. Do not worry. I won’t tell.”

I smile over at him.

“I have known Bek since we were both kits,” he says after a moment. “He has a hard time accepting another’s choice, especially if it does not agree with his.”

“Yeah, I noticed.”

Ereven looks over at me and pauses his slow walk. “Do you need protection from him?”

I stop, too, and stare up at him. “Protection? What do you mean?”

“I mean, do you wish my help? Shall I court you? If he sees you responding to another male’s attentions, he will eventually back off.” His expression is carefully neutral.

Oh. After a moment, I realize what he’s offering. A fake relationship, purely to get Bek off my back. I love it. I smile brilliantly at Ereven. “You’d do that for me?”

He tilts his head, studying me. “I would.”

For a brief moment, I experience a pang of regret. I wish that this handsome man with his arching horns and his tangle of short hair was interested in more than just pretending. That instead of being gallant, he was actually really interested in me. Ereven’s easy demeanor is utterly appealing, and there’s something about him that

draws me like a moth to a flame. But I feel tainted by my past with Bek. Friendship's all I'm going to get, but I'll take it. "Then I say yes."

He nods slowly. "Tomorrow, then?"

"Tomorrow," I agree. And the knot of dread in my stomach eases for the first time in days. Maybe months.

GEORGIE

“Did you find it?” I ask Tiffany the next morning from my perch on one of the stools by the decorated tree. Claire’s stringing more garlands and I’m working on making a rattle out of a leather pouch with some of her discards.

Tiffany pulls off her cloak, dusting snow out of her thick black curls, and holds her basket aloft. “You wanted *hraku*, you got it, girl.”

“Yay!” I cry out, loud enough to make Rukhar hiccup in his cradle at my feet. Oops. I’m supposed to be watching the baby while Harlow does more of her surveys, but the *hraku* makes me excited. According to the ship’s computer, the seeds have a molecular structure not unlike Earth-sugar, and we’re all excited at the thought of a test drive. “Bring it over!”

Tiffany settles in next to me and reveals the long tubers. “There’s a whole ton of them growing on the side of the hill by the stream. I think they’re sheltered from the wind there.” She pulls one out and sniffs it, then offers it to me. “You sure about this? They smell awful.”

I take one stem of *hraku* from her. Most of the plants on this planet are rather spindly with even longer roots that reach below the snow. This one is no exception, but instead of thin, long roots, these are plump, fingerlike ones that look wholly unappealing. I wrinkle my nose and sniff it, and Tiff’s right - it smells like stinky socks. “Woof.”

“I know,” Tiffany says. She pulls out her knife. “The computer said the seeds, right?”

I nod and lean in close, curious as she deftly cuts one root open from top to tip. Of all the humans, Tiffany’s the one that excels at

everything. While others might be competent in one or two new skills that we've picked up, like Liz with her hunting or Megan with her macramé leather working, Tiffany is good at everything. She's beautiful, too, with dark skin the color of rich bronze. I'd hate the bitch if she wasn't so awesome.

She pulls the tough skin of the root apart and reveals the interior seeds. The sweaty sock smell wafts over us, and we both gag. That, combined with the greasy sheen of wet goo covering the seeds? I'm starting to second-guess what the computer told us.

"You want to try it first?" Tiff asks.

"Me? Hell no! You do it." I push it back to her. "I'm pregnant and have a sensitive stomach, remember?"

She snorts. "Bullshit." Her gaze skims the cavern. "We need a test subject. Where's Josie when you need her?"

I giggle. "Be nice."

"That was nice," Tiffany says with a grin. But when Claire takes another section of garland from my hands, I study her. "Hey, Claire, you want to try this root for us?"

She peers down at me, all big eyes and silky brown hair. "Not really?"

"Come on," Tiffany coaxes. "It's supposed to taste like sugar." She fishes out a seed with the tip of her blade and offers it up to Claire.

I expect her to flinch away, but to my surprise, Claire plucks the seed off the knife and puts it in her mouth. She crunches, her face scrunched up, and then shrugs. "Doesn't have much of a taste. Do you need to cook it? Like pumpkin seeds?"

Tiffany looks at me and shrugs. "Can't hurt."

Stacy has a metal skillet that Harlow made for her from metal parts on the ship, and we coax it out of her to fry up the seeds. By the time the first batch is ready, the cavern smells like sweaty socks - and sugar. There's an appealing scent coming from the cooked seeds, and there's no need to cajole anyone to try them. We all take a few, burning our fingertips in the process.

I pop one in my mouth and a sweet, buttery taste like candy bursts over my tongue.

Tiffany's eyes widen. "It tastes like toffee."

“Oh my God,” murmurs Stacy, and she plucks another out of the skillet. “She’s right.”

The seeds are gone in an instant, and we pull out more of the hraku stems to cook up more of the treat. “We should take this outside,” Tiffany says when one of the elders passes by, waving a hand in the air. “It’s kind of fragrant.”

She’s right. We all bundle up and head outside, starting a small fire in a makeshift pit close to the entrance. I make sure tiny Rukhar is nestled tight in his furs, and we sit in a circle outside, eating seeds and chatting as the day goes on. Tiffany is in charge of cooking, and Stacy brings out a pair of tongs so we’ll stop burning our fingertips.

It’s one of the best afternoons I’ve had in a while.

A few of the hunters come outside, curious. “I brought these for you,” Hassen says to Tiffany, and holds out a handful of fresh-plucked plants. “They are not poison.”

Oh lord, again with this. I roll my eyes. “I cannot believe mistletoe is so hard for them to grasp.”

Nora giggles so hard that she snorts.

“Thanks,” Tiffany says, a smile on her face. But she doesn’t reward him with a kiss and he eventually wanders a short distance away, clearly confused by the ritual.

A few moments later, Taushen arrives and offers Tiffany another handful of plants. Her eyes narrow, but she gives him the same polite response. Then, Vaza, one of the elders, also arrives with plants for Tiffany.

I hold back my smile as Tiffany shoots me a ‘kill me now’ look and thanks him for the plants. “I’m good on not-poison now, but thank you.”

He nods as if he’s doing her a favor, and then waits.

Tiffany pretends to be really interested in seed cooking.

Rukhar burbles, and I bounce him on my knee. “Hey, Vaza? You know, if you want to give Tiffany some not-poison she’d really enjoy some more hraku.”

His lined face lights up, and he rushes off before the others can join him. Both Hassen and Taushen look annoyed at this privilege. Tiffany’s doing her best to ignore both of them. Poor Tiffany. It must suck to be the sexiest single woman on the planet.

Poor Josie. No one's chasing after her. Probably because she talks too much. Her life seems to be an endless quest to needle the crap out of Haeden. Maybe that scares suitors off.

A few more people drift out of the caves to see what the humans are up to, and I notice that one hunter - Ereven - puts his cloak on Claire's shoulders and she blushes furiously. So cute. I hadn't realized she had a new boyfriend after breaking up with the last one, but it's a definite improvement. Ereven is easy-going and friendly to everyone, unlike the hot-tempered Bek.

Hassen and Taushen are still standing around, and eventually Tiffany sighs. "Why don't you guys go hunt or something?"

"I'm staying around the caves," Hassen says, glaring at Taushen.

"And I," chimes in Taushen.

"There's plenty of food for tonight," Ereven says, and plays with a lock of Claire's hair. Her face is bright red, but she looks happy.

Unlike Tiffany, who just looks miserable at all the attention. Even more so when Vaza returns with a handful of hraku roots, and Salukh and Rokan arrive to see what the fuss is about. "Why don't you guys play a game?" I offer, ever the peacemaker. It's my job as chief's mate to try and smooth things out when he's out on the hunt, like he is right now. "Do you have something you play on, um, days that you don't hunt?"

"We compete," Taushen says boldly. "Shall we compete for you?"

"Sure." I tuck the restless baby against my arm and rock him, watching as Tiffany starts a fresh batch of the tasty hraku seeds. I'm focused on her slim brown hands.

BANG!

The sound's like a car crash, so loud and violent that I jump, nearly dropping Rukhar. I clutch him close and look up in shock. Taushen and Hassen are shoving each other, then retreat backward a few steps. They crouch low, one nods, and then they fling themselves together again. **BANG!** Their horns clash and they both stagger backward.

"Holy crap," whispers Tiffany, staring.

I stare, too. It's like a pair of rams from a nature documentary. They smack into each other with another loud crash, retreat, and then do so again. This is...a game? Rukhar starts to cry, and Nora

has a pained look on her face, clutching her stomach. Yeah, this is not the peaceful afternoon I had in mind. I reach out to Claire, grabbing her hand. “Why don’t you show them how to play um, football or something?”

“Football?” she squeaks.

“Whatever,” I tell her, getting to my feet with the wailing baby. Nora gets to her feet, too. “Just anything but that,” I tell Claire, and head into the cave, soothing Rukhar.

“Hey Georgie,” Nora says, and I turn to see she’s a few steps behind me still. Her face is pale, and she flinches when another loud *BANG* comes from outside. Her hands go to her stomach again, and I realize that something else is bothering her.

I gasp. “Is it—?”

She nods and then bends over, her breath hissing.

“Maylak,” I cry out. “We’ve got a kit on the way!”

CLAIRE

Me teach football? I don’t know much about the game myself. I stare at the faces of the hunters around me. “Um.”

“Show us your human game,” Ereven encourages. “We wish to learn.” His gaze is steady but warm, making me feel valued despite my panic. He puts a big hand on my back, and even though I can’t feel his skin through the thick cloak he draped over my shoulders, I feel...cuddled. It’s weird. It’s not unwelcome, though.

“All right,” I breathe, thinking hard. “There’s a lot of rules to the human one, but I’ll show you a modified version.”

Josie bounces up to us, clapping her fur-mitted hands. “Can I play, too?”

Oh jeez. My mental images of tackle football with the seven foot aliens goes out the window. If Josie wants to play, they’ll crush her into itty bitty bits. “I don’t know if that’s such a good idea.”

Her face falls with disappointment, and nearby, Haeden snorts with approval, like crushing Josie’s hopes was his favorite thing today. And I change my mind. “We’ll do European football.”

“European?” Josie asks.

“You know, soccer.”

“Oooh!” She claps her hands again. “I’m so in!”

An old waterskin is found and packed with leather scraps, then sewn shut. As the ‘ball’ is prepared, I designate the field and the goals. I can’t remember how many people play on a soccer team, so we end up going with two teams of five players and a goalie. I don’t bother with positions, mostly because I don’t know them. The object? Get the ball in the other person’s goal to score a point. And since we don’t have clocks, we pick a number: first team to five wins. We do a schoolyard pick with Josie and I as team coaches, since we’re the ones that know the rules. Tiffany and the other humans continue to cook up tasty seeds for the spectators, and we get on the field and play.

“Shirts versus skins,” Josie bellows to her team. “We’re skins! Mostly because I don’t want to have to stare at Haeden’s half-naked self any more than usual.” She shoots an arch look over at my team.

Haeden’s on my team (I think Josie would have committed ritual suicide before picking him), along with Ereven, Rokan, Salukh, and skinny Farli, who’s small but wanted to play. Josie’s team is Taushen, Vaza, Aehako, Zolaya, and Cashol. Dagesh disappeared inside the caves with his mate the moment he heard Nora was going into labor, and Bek refused to play.

Josie’s team strips their shirts off, all except Josie. She’s minding the goal so we bend the rules and say it’s fine for goalies to be covered head to toe. I let Farli mind the goal for our team and run out on the field with the others. From the moment the ball hits the field, it’s mass chaos. Everyone forgets the rules constantly - Aehako grabs the ball as it goes flying toward him at one point, only to be tackled by Ereven for cheating. Actually, there’s a lot of tackling, a lot of smacking and shoving, and not a lot of actual footwork.

It doesn’t matter. I don’t think I’ve laughed so hard in forever. Everyone’s enjoying themselves, and when Farli slaps away the ball as it heads toward her and our team cheers, she glows with happiness.

My team’s ahead of Josie’s by two points, and with one more goal we can win. It’s clear that Josie doesn’t have the stamina to keep up with the sa-khui, and she’s panting hard. I am too, but it’s easier for me to fall back and let the others run (and shove) the ball

down the field. Rokan gets the ball from Vaza, and then charges for Josie's goal. He crashes into her, knocking her to the ground as he makes the final point for our team. Poor Josie lies flat on her back in the snow, and Rokan holds the ball into the air, grinning wildly. "We win!"

A low snarl, and then a moment later, another sa-khui slams into Rokan from the side, knocking him to the ground. The ball flies out of his hands and he tumbles backward into the snow, even as Josie sits up and shakes the snow off her body.

"Hey," I call out. "Stop! No fighting!"

The male leaning over Rokan's fallen form is none other than Haeden. He gives me a narrow-eyed look, glances over at Josie, and then stalks back into the caves, clearly in a foul mood.

Well, that was weird. I jog over to Josie's side and help her up. "You okay?"

"Nothing a quick trip to the healer won't fix," she says cheerily. "I think I'm done playing, though." Her hand goes to her side and she winces. "Yep. Definitely done."

She uses my shoulder for a support and I walk her over to Tiffany's small fire, where the other pregnant women are seated. Room is made for Josie, even as Rokan jogs over, an unhappy look on his face. "Did I hurt you, Joh-see? I did not mean it."

Josie beams a smile at him. "I'm fine, really. Just kinda told me that I need to sit down and let you wrecking balls play against each other."

"Ray-king bahls?" he asks, parroting the human word.

"Just trust me."

"Sub someone in for both of us," I tell him. "You guys have the rules down now. We'll watch from the sidelines." *And try not to get trampled.* The sa-khui are definitely competitive. They've taken to the sport with fierce enthusiasm. Already others are waiting to get their turn to play, and hooting encouragement on the sidelines.

I squeeze in next to Josie, only to see Bek arrive at the campfire, a scowl on his face as he glares down at me. I become acutely aware that I'm wearing Ereven's cloak and have been laughing with him all afternoon. That I picked him first for my team. That Bek's probably been watching the whole time.

My tongue feels glued to the roof of my mouth. He really wants a confrontation here? Now? When everyone's having such a good day?

Ereven jogs over to my side and presses a kiss to my temple. "Sit here and watch me play? I shall win the next point just for you."

I bite my lip, closing my eyes so I won't have to see Bek's scowl when Ereven strokes my cheek with his knuckles. I hate that Bek's here to pollute that tender caress. Then again, Ereven wouldn't have done it if Bek wasn't being such a turd. I feel all turned around. "Good luck," I tell Ereven.

He heads back out to the field, and then calls out, "Bek! Join us! We need your expertise, my friend!"

I remain still, waiting to see if Bek's going to stand here and glare at me for the rest of the afternoon, or if he's going to join the others. After a long, tense moment, he stalks away, heading toward the field.

I exhale in relief.

"At some point, you're going to have to talk it out with him," Josie whispers.

"I know. Just...not right now."



THE SA-KHUI continue to play bastardized soccer until the twin suns go down and the weather gets chilly. A few people bring out torches, unwilling for the fun to end, but it's getting cold and we're all tired and wind-chapped after spending the afternoon outside. I yawn and lean against Josie, huddled near the fire as she tells us one horrible Christmas story after another. Apparently she had a terrible childhood and likes to regale us with tales of how awful it was.

I'm drifting off when strong arms lift me up and carry me. I blink awake to see Ereven's handsome face near mine. He tucks my body against his chest. "You're tired. Let me put you to sleep."

"I can walk," I protest.

"I know you can. But I like to carry you," he tells me.

Oh. Bek must be around, because he's flirting with me. I settle back into his arms and press my cheek to his chest. He's warm, skin

flushed with sweat from a hard day of playing soccer, but I don't mind it. I like his scent. Actually, I like him. And I feel guilty about that for some reason. Like because Bek won't leave me alone, I'm not free to enjoy another man's flirting...even if it's fake flirting and means nothing.

I...kind of wish it wasn't fake, though. That he really was interested in me. Why, oh why hadn't I noticed Ereven instead of falling for Bek's bravado?

He takes me into Megan's cave and gently lies me atop my bedroll. Instead of leaving, though, he sits next to me and pulls me against him. He's holding me. I haven't realized until now just how starved for affection I've been ever since we've landed. Bek never touched me outside of the furs, and I wonder if he even likes humans, or if he just likes 'owning' one. But Ereven's hand strokes my arm, and his other hugs me against him, and I feel...loved. Tears burn in my eyes, and I want to thank him for this small gesture.

"May I ask a question?" he says after a long moment. His fingers trace patterns on my lower arm.

I nod.

"Were you in love with Bek? At any point?"

The man does not pull his punches. Whew. I consider my answer for a moment. Will he think me awful if I admit that I never did? Or will he understand? I hope he does. "Imagine that you wake up from sleep to find that you've somehow landed on another planet. There's no more home. There's no safety. You're weak here, and completely dependent on others to help you out. You don't know how the aliens are going to react to a bunch of humans showing up. You're afraid to make a wrong move. There are a few people that are lucky and resonate. They immediately find a life mate, and those people are safe. But not everyone resonates. Not everyone is safe. And imagine that you can't take care of yourself. You can't hunt. You can't make leather. You can't cook. You just have to hope that the tribe will like you enough to keep you." I close my eyes, remembering those early days of terror, of gnawing uncertainty. "Then imagine one of the hunters decides that he likes you. That he wants to be your mate. He doesn't seem bad. What would you do?"

“Mmm.” His response is a low rumble against my cheek. “You chose safety and security. But our people would never harm you. You must know this.”

“I know this now,” I tell him. “I did not know it when we first arrived. It felt...safer to be with someone, even if I didn’t resonate.” Now, I’m relieved beyond belief that I didn’t resonate to Bek. Not every resonance ends up being a happy one, and I can’t imagine living the rest of my life under his thumb. “Do you think less of me?”

“For doing what you felt you must to survive? Of course not.” His hand glides up my arm, and then he caresses my cheek. “You were frightened. You did what you felt you had to. How can I judge?”

I open my eyes and gaze up at him. I’m surprised at how close our faces are. This close, I can see his dusky blue skin gleaming with sweat, the dip in the center of his full lower lip, his high cheekbones, the way his sweaty hair sticks to his brows, even where his horns meet his skin. He’s really beautiful, and I’ve never thought this about one of the sa-khui before. It startles me.

Ereven gazes down at me. He brushes his fingers under my chin, and then nuzzles his nose against mine. “Sleep well, Claire.”

Then he releases me and gets up, padding silently out of Megan’s cave. I’m left in my blankets, no longer sleepy. And I wish that he’d kissed me. Those moments together felt like something real. Something special between us.

And Bek? Bek was nowhere to be seen.

But isn’t this relationship supposed to be fake?

GEORGIE

I stay at Nora's side as she labors, offering solidarity and support while Dagesh holds her hand and strokes her hair. He's pretty calm for a dad-to-be. It's probably a good thing since Nora's a blubbering mess every time she has a contraction. She keeps crying about how much she loves her mate, and how she doesn't want to let him down, and on and on until even Maylak rolls her eyes with amusement. Poor Nora. She'll probably regret all the babbling in the morning if she remembers it. Even though she's in pain from labor, I'm still incredibly jealous of her because my kiddo is still kicking my girl parts, which means my baby hasn't turned. Which means my baby isn't going to show up anytime soon.

It sucks.

It's late at night when Nora finally gives birth - a tiny, squalling girl with blue skin and a shock of white-blond hair. Two minutes later? Her twin emerges, equally blonde and equally pissed. Calm Dagesh takes one look at the fact that he now has twins and has to leave the cave to get some air. Even Maylak's a bit surprised.

Nora's not, though. She takes the first born baby in her arms, holds it to her breast and gives us an ultra-contented look. "I thought there was a lot of kicking going on," she murmurs.

"Twins is incredible," I tell her. Now I'm doubly jealous. Her babies are tiny but beautiful. I hold one as the other feeds. "Do you have two names picked out?"

"I can't Brangelina our names," she complains. "They're awful together. No-Da? Dag-no? Gesh-ra?"

I wince at the latter one. Dagesh's name doesn't have the 'g' sound the English language does. It's more swallowed and guttural...and probably impossible to make a good pairing with. "You don't have to do a name mash-up," I tell her. "It's just a thing some of us were doing."

She bites her lip and gazes down at the baby at her breast. "I do have a couple of names picked out, but you're probably going to laugh."

"I won't." I'm too awestruck by the tiny newborn in my arms. My heart squeezes with envy. I wish she was mine. Two girls - Vektal will be so happy for the tribe. For so long, there has been nothing but males born to them, and I know he worried when Harlow had a boy.

"Anna," she says, startling me out of my reverie. "Anna and Elsa. Like from the movie *Frozen*."

A giggle escapes me. "It's perfect."

"It is, isn't it?" she muses as she strokes the white-blond hair of the baby at her breast.



I STAY with Nora for another hour or two, making sure she's comfortable as she feeds the twins. Dagesh recovers from his masculine panic-attack and takes one tiny twin from my arms, staring down at her in wonder. This time, he's the one constantly babbling to his mate that he loves her, and Nora beams, tired and sweaty but so happy.

Did I mention I was jealous?

I leave when the healer, Maylak, leaves. We walk out together, and the main cavern is silent other than the drip of water and the distant rumble of someone's snores. "They are a good, healthy size," the healer tells me. "For all that they are small. The kits will have no trouble accepting a khui."

I nod, thinking. The sa-khui traditionally wait four days before giving a baby one of the khui symbionts. One of the massive sa-kohtsk beasts has to be hunted in order to get a khui for the new child, and the hunts are dangerous things. If someone else has a

baby in the next few days, so much the better. I automatically touch my stomach, but when the baby kicks me in the nether-regions again, I inwardly sigh. Still hasn't moved. "Maybe Stacy or Ariana will have their kits in the next day or two and we can have several done at once." I look at the healer thoughtfully. "Can you induce? Coax the body into giving birth?"

She shakes her head. "I can only coax the khui to do something it wants to do. It will not wish to have a kit earlier than anticipated. And because the kit has no khui, I cannot influence it at all."

Well, it was worth a shot. I yawn, and she echoes it. "All right. See you in the morning." We separate and I waddle over to the cave I share with Vektal. Our tiny fire is banked, and he's sleeping on top of the furs, clearly waiting for me to come home.

I'm a little hungry and thirsty, but sleep calls to me more than anything. I crawl into bed with my mate and curl my body against his.

Vektal wakes up and pulls the furs over me, even as I snuggle down against him. "The kit?" he murmurs, pressing a sleepy kiss to my brow. "Is it born?"

"Two kits," I tell him. "Both girls."

"That is very good news," he tells me and caresses my cheek. "Will you have ours soon, my mate?"

"I wish. He still hasn't turned." I want to say more, but I'm too tired, and I'm asleep before I realize it.



WHEN I WAKE up late the next morning, my mate is gone, and my back aches from sleeping wrong. Food has been set out for me on one of the small bone plates I like, and my water skin is freshly filled. He's a good man to take care of me.

My furs are also full of plants. Intisar leaves. The weird hraku that has the tasty, candy-like seeds. Three-leaf plants, which are good for tea. Herbs of all kinds. Branches from the eyelash-like pink trees. All kinds of plants.

These people really don't grasp the mistletoe concept. I laugh as I push the blankets off my legs and it rains more plants down. The

entire cave is covered. Vektal must have been up early to do this much work, and I'm glad he picked useful plants, because it looks like he denuded an entire field, and the ice planet isn't exactly abundant in greenery.

It's so sweet. He's showing me how much he loves me.

It almost makes up for the horrible moment when I realize I've wet the bed. I stare down at my soaked leggings in awkward horror. In the next moment, a sharp pain ripples through my abdomen, and the breath hisses out of me.

I wanted my baby to come. My wish has been granted.

I hadn't thought it'd hurt this much, though. A groan escapes me, and I try to roll out of bed to change my leggings. The contractions are coming fast and hard, and I'm not even to my knees before another one rips through me. Jesus. Wasn't labor supposed to be slow? There was barely any time between that first contraction and the next one. I whimper my way to my feet, strip off my leggings, and then another contraction rips through me.

Fuck the leggings. I grab a fur and wrap it around my body, then stumble out of my cave. "Maylak? Maylak!"

Today of all days, the main cavern is quiet. Josie's sitting by one of the communal fire pits, sewing something. Everyone else is gone, though I hear shouts of laughter coming from the mouth of the cave. Outside, then, probably playing more soccer. As I stagger forward, I hold onto the wall for support. I take maybe three steps before another pain rockets through me, and I double over.

"Georgie?" I hear Josie put down her sewing and she scrambles to my side. "You okay, girl? You're not looking like your normal cheery self--"

"Baby," I tell her between clenched teeth.

"I'll get the healer," she cries out and rushes away.

Thank goodness. I lean against the cave wall, trying to catch my breath before the next contraction rips through me. By the time Josie returns with Maylak, I've had two more contractions, and each one sucked more than the last. I huff and puff like I've seen in the movies when people give birth, but all it does is make me feel out of breath.

Maylak moves to my side and her warm, strong hands support me as I sag against her. "Let us go back to your bed," she soothes.

“You should relax.”

“Water broke while I was sleeping,” I tell her.

“Josie can get furs from my cave,” she says, voice motherly and calm. Hard to believe that we’re about the same age. She’s so wise and serene and me? I’m a mess right about now. I let her lead me in to my cave, and Josie runs back a few minutes later with an armful of blankets and Claire in tow. They switch out my blankets and Maylak helps me settle back down, just as another cramp shoots through my belly.

“This kit will be coming fast, it seems,” Maylak’s low murmur is as soothing as running water. She helps me take off my tunic and then her hand goes to my belly.

“I’ll go see where Vektal’s at.” Josie blurts the words and then immediately scrambles back out of the cave. Claire remains, hugging her sides and trying to stay out of the way.

It’s real quiet for a minute, the only sound that of my harsh breathing. I glance over at the healer, expecting to see more of her serene expression. Her hand is still on my stomach, but she’s frowning. “What is it?” My voice cracks on the words. “What’s wrong?”

Before she even says it, I know. “The kit is turned the wrong way,” Maylak says, her hands on my stomach as she presses, feeling around. I bite off a cry as another contraction starts. Dear lord, it feels like my insides are trying to stage a walk-out.

She’s right, though. The baby hasn’t switched positions and has been feet down for days now. I don’t know a lot about birth, but I know that’s the wrong way for things to proceed. “What do we do? Can you tell it to turn around?”

Her eyes widen, and I realize the healer’s on the verge of panicking, too. “I cannot communicate with the kit,” she whispers. “It has no khui.”

Oh shit. Oh *shit*. I’m going to give birth to a motherfucking *breech* baby and no one can help me? Panic sets in, and I start to hyperventilate.

Vektal storms in a moment later, eyes wild. Josie trots in behind him, and our small cave immediately feels cramped.

I grip Maylak's hand to silence her and force a bright smile to my face. "Hey, baby," I say to Vektal. "Were you nearby?"

"I was playing fuhtbawl with the others." He drops next to our bed. "The kit comes?"

"Yup," I manage to grit my teeth through the next rippling contraction, and only groan a little. Vektal's eyes widen and my mate looks more than a little freaked out.

He rubs a hand over his jaw and then rakes it through his hair. "What can I do, my mate? How can I help?"

"I would love it if you could actually leave for a bit, baby." I reach out and pat his hand. "I don't want you to see this."

"What? Why?" If I'd reached out and slapped him across the face, I don't think my mate could have looked any more shocked. Even Maylak looks surprised.

"Because this is going to go on for a while, and I'm going to get real cranky. And I don't want to call you bad things and yell at you. And...it's a human tradition to just have women with them."

His brows draw together. "But Dagesh—"

"So Nora's not as traditional as me," I snap. "So what. It doesn't change that I don't want you here." Another contraction rips through me, and I clutch my belly, crying out.

Vektal looks panicked. He shoots a glance to the healer, then back at me, clearly torn.

I'm not going to change my mind, though. If this is going to go bad - and all signs point to yes - I don't want him to see this. None of this. Not until we're out the other side, for better or for worse. And seeing him freak out? It's just going to make me freak out more.

"You wish me to...leave?" There's hurt in his strong voice.

"I do." And when he continues to glare at me stubbornly, I lash out at him with words I don't mean. "I wish I'd never come here. I wish none of this had ever happened. Ever!"

He stares at me for a long moment. Then he leans in, presses a kiss to my forehead, and storms out of our cave. I inwardly wince, because I know I've hurt him. But I'm sparing him, I tell myself. Because right now? This baby is ass-backwards and I don't know how we're going to fix that.

We could both die. I don't want him to see that. I don't want him to view any of that. If it means I have to say a few ugly words to him, then I will.

Josie creeps in a moment later, gesturing after her. "Yo, was that Vektal? Because he looked super pissed, dude. Maybe—"

"I sent him away," I say, and then grimace when another contraction rips through me. "Said some not nice things. Maylak, we have to do something."

The healer wrings her hands. *Wrings her damn hands*. "I have never delivered a kit that is backwards."

Pretty sure I'm going to freak out now. My baby's stuck inside me and no one knows how to get it out.

"Oh my God, it's backwards?" Josie squeals. "What do you mean, it's backwards? Like the butt end is coming out first or what? Because I'm pretty sure—"

Claire grabs her arm to silence her. "Not now, Josie."

Josie's gaze flicks from me to Maylak. "Are you guys gonna fix it? Is this gonna be gross? Should I cover my eyes?"

"I don't know how to fix it," Maylak tells me.

"So we're just going to let it happen?" I pant, and a hysterical note raises in my voice. "Because I'm pretty sure that doesn't work for me! If this baby comes out backwards, that is bad news!"

Josie's eyes widen and she gallops back out of the cave.

"Must be nice to be able to run away from problems," I snipe, cranky. Josie's not the one giving birth, after all.

Claire shrugs and kneels at the foot of my bed. "What can I get you? Some tea? Some water? Something to eat?"

I bite down on my lip and look at the healer. Maylak keeps putting her hands on my stomach, but it's clear she's not sure what to do. I'm feeling panicky. This baby's coming fast, and it's coming wrong. I fight the urge to burst into tears of self-pity. For the first time in a long, long time, I wish we were back on Earth. Earth has hospitals and neonatal units and people that know what to do if your baby's turned backward.

"I'll get you some tea," Claire says, and plucks a sprig of leafy greens off the bed.

For some reason that strikes me as funny, and I start to laugh. Maybe I'm a bit hysterical. Okay, a lot. Whatever. It feels good to laugh, and I laugh all the way through my next contraction. I'm still laughing when Josie returns a moment later, breathless from running, and she has Tiffany in tow. "What now?" I snarl at them. "We parading everyone in so they can come see me try to give birth? Really, Josie?"

"Tiffany's from a farm," Josie blurts. "That's why I got her."

"A farm?" I'm not following her train of thought. "What—"

Tiffany brushes aside the strewn plants and kneels at the end of my bed. She puts her hands on her thighs and gives me a tight smile. "So, like, I've only done this with cattle. But it's probably the same, right?"

"What's the same?" I don't like the way this is heading.

"Turning the baby," Tiffany says.

Relief shoots through me. Hope. I'm still panicked, but at least someone has a solution. There's a way to fix this. Of course there is. "You've done this before?"

"On cattle," she says, and offers me a smile. She looks over at Josie. "Get some hot water and soap for me to clean my hands?"

Josie rushes back out again, and I'm sorry I yelled at her. I'll apologize later, to both her and Vektal, when I'm not getting my insides split in two. The next contraction rips through me, and I scream again. Lots of apologizing when I'm done. Lots. "Just tell me how we get this over with," I grit out.

"Well, you're not going to like it," Tiffany says. "But I don't know that we have any better options."

"Just tell me." I can take it.

"I'm going to stick my hand up your cooter," she blurts out. "And turn the baby manually."

I blink.

"That was human tongue," Maylak says. "I did not catch. What is coo-tur?"

"You'll see," I say grimly and suppress a shudder. Oh God, I must really be out of options, because this is all I've got. "Is it going to hurt?" I ask Tiffany.

"I don't know. I've never asked the cows." Her smile is apologetic.

I can feel another contraction bunching in my abdomen, and I'm suddenly so glad that I sent Vektal away. I don't think I'd want him watching as another woman fishes around inside me with her hand. Yikes. I don't think I want to watch, either. "Let's get this over with," I say, and grip Maylak's arm for support.



YEAH, I'm right. It's not fun and it doesn't feel good. In fact, it's pretty awful. But a short time later, the baby's turned and everything more or less flies after that. Before I know it, the birth is done and then I've got a baby in my arms. It's a big, squalling healthy baby the exact same shade of pale blue as Vektal, with horns, a tail, and curls of brown hair that are the only thing my baby girl seems to have inherited from me.

My Talie's beautiful. So beautiful.

I'm exhausted and raw, physically and mentally. Physically is something Maylak can take care of, and so I lay quietly and nurse Talie as she encourages my khui to knit torn flesh and heal my tired body. Talie nurses like a champ, and I hold the kit to my breast, feeling her suck, and I'm just...overwhelmed. So completely overwhelmed.

Claire left a short time ago with the fur-wrapped afterbirth for Vektal to dispose of, and the others have cycled out. Josie, ever a busy-body, has brought more clean furs, some snacks, and hot tea that has long gone cold. Tiffany left the moment Talie came out, wanting to give me some alone time (I suspect to wash her hands again, not that I blame her). Soon it's just me and Maylak.

And Talie. Sweet, sweet Talie. I keep touching her round baby cheek. Her little face is dusky and flushed, and her eyes are tightly sealed shut. She's perfect, though, right down to her teeny tiny tail. Her small hand grips my finger as she nurses, and I notice she's got four fingers. I count her toes and she has three toes. Huh. It just makes her more perfect in my eyes.

I'm biased, but she's the prettiest, healthiest, sweetest baby that's been born yet. I can't wait to show her to my mate.

Of course, my mate thinks I hate him right now. Guilt rushes through me. I hate that I hurt him. I hate that pregnant-and-panicky-Georgie turns into such a crankmonster. He deserves better than me.

Maylak gets up a short time later. Her face is drawn and she's clearly exhausted. "I'll return in the morning and coax your khui into more healing."

Morning? Is it night? It's impossible to tell in the cave depths. All I know is that I'm tired, but utterly blissful. "Thank you, Maylak."

She smiles at me, touches my arm, and then leaves the cave.

I'm alone...with Talie. My baby's here, and she's more than I ever dreamed of. I keep holding her and holding her, counting tiny fingers and toes and picking out all the ways she's like me (my nose, my hair, my fingers) and the ways she's like Vektal (everything else). She's sleeping peacefully, curled up against my bare breast, and I want her to stay right there forever, snuggled against me.

Someone enters the cave, breaking our little cocoon of happiness. I look up, and it's Vektal.

My mate. My love.

And I've been such a dick to him.

Hot tears immediately start to flood down my face. "She's here," I tell him, between blubbering. "She's here and she's perfect and I'm a jerk."

He moves to the edge of the furs, where I'm bundled up with Talie. There's an expression of wonder on his face as he gazes at us. The baby burbles, spits a little breast milk, and then goes back to sleep. I wipe her tiny face with a bit of leather and then swaddle her again. Vektal watches her and then his gaze meets mine. "Can I hold her?"

Oh. Wow, I really am a jerk. I didn't even offer, and she's his, too. I hold the baby out to him, even though every bit of me screams that I want to keep her in my arms, like a greedy child with a toy. "Support her head," I say as he takes her in his arms. I don't know why I'm being so paranoid - the way he holds her is perfect. He cradles Talie's tiny body in his big hands and gazes down at her with an expression akin to reverence.

“She’s beautiful,” he whispers. He pulls her closer to his chest, holding her against him like she’s the most precious thing on the planet. Heck, she is. The look he gives me is soft with wonder and adoration. “You’ve done well, my mate.”

I start to cry all over again, because he’s being so nice and I was so awful to him earlier. “I didn’t mean what I said,” I tell him between sobs. “I love being here with you. You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me. You and our baby. I’ve never regretted a moment of landing here. I—“

The baby stirs, and Vektal gives her a little jiggle to comfort her, shushing and humming as he does. A moment later, the baby settles down again. He grins at me, and hands her back. I take her, surprised that he’s returning her so quickly, especially when he’s clearly good with babies.

He crawls into the furs next to me and wraps an arm around my shoulders, hugging me against him. “Are you worried over what you said to me earlier?”

I sniff, because the tears threaten to return. “I didn’t mean it. Any of it. There was just weird stuff happening with the birth and I didn’t want you to see me in pain and so I just said whatever I could to get you out of the room.”

“Why did you not want me there?” His big hand squeezes my shoulder. “I am your mate. I should be at your side at all times, especially when you are hurting.”

I swallow back my words. Truth is, I didn’t know if I’d live through the next day, if they couldn’t get my baby out. I wanted Vektal to remember me happy and healthy, not screaming in pain and with Tiffany’s hand shoved up my girl parts. After a long time, I say, “It just wasn’t my best moment. Please don’t think I hate you or this place. I love you. Even if I could go home, I would stay here with you. I meant none of it.”

“Of course you didn’t, my mate.” Vektal gently brushes the tears from my cheeks. “You were stressed and our kit was arriving. You were in pain. You said things you did not mean. I never thought for a moment that your words were truth.”

He’s not holding it against me? I am the luckiest woman alive. “I love you so much,” I tell him, the knot in my throat enormous. “You’re

my world.”

He caresses my cheek and I know I’m forgiven. I tuck my head against his shoulder and we are calm and quiet, watching our new baby sleep. He strokes my cheek absently, and neither of us speaks for a long time.

Talie wrinkles her nose and screws her face up as if she’s going to wail. I hold my breath and her little fists fly in the air. Then, she lets out a loud fart and settles down again. Babies. Even when they make gross noises, they’re adorable.

Vektal takes her from my arms again and holds her close. “She’s beautiful,” he murmurs. “Just like her mother.” Just as I get all weepy again, he lifts her tiny hand and she wraps four itty bitty fingers around his big blue one.

I totally melt.

“What did you name her?” he asks.

“Talie,” I say softly. “For Vektal and Georgie. It’s the last part of both of our names.” Mine’s actually Georgina, but no one ever calls me that.

“I never thought it would be a girl,” he muses as he holds her tiny hand. “But now that she is here, I cannot imagine anything else.”

I lean against him, tired but happy. “Pretty wonderful, isn’t it?”

“She is.” He kisses my head. “You are, too.” When I rest my head against him again, he sighs.

“What?” I ask, curious.

“I am not convinced these human holidays are worth it.” He gestures at our small cave, still leaf-strewn from his earlier efforts. “Look at all the work I did, and not a single kiss on my cock from my mate.”

My snort of derision turns into giggles, and I punch him in the side. “Your mate was a little busy today.”

“So she was.” He grins, and I realize he was teasing.

CLAIRE

A few days later after Talie was born, Nora, Dagesh, Vektal, Georgie, and a party of several hunters leave to go hunt the sa-kohtsk for the three babies. They will be gone for a few days, and our 'holiday' has already gone on for a while. It's decided that while they're gone, we're to finish the celebration with a feast and gift-giving, and Harlow will work on using her stone-cutter since the newborns won't be home.

I'll be sad when the holiday celebration ends for a variety of reasons. It's been fun, and I've enjoyed the daily soccer matches between the big, hulking sa-khui hunters who seem to think it's a full-contact sport. They're beautiful to watch, though, because they're utterly graceful as they move. And okay, they're also nearly naked and muscular. It's not exactly a chore, and Tiffany, Josie, and I spend a lot of time outside snacking on cooked hraku seeds and watching on the sidelines.

There's been a joyous spirit in the caves recently, thanks to the holiday celebration. People are laughing more, playing more, and little Esha and Sessah - the only small children - have been receiving daily presents that make both squeal with glee. Farli's older than them, but she gets presents from her parents, and she's equally pleased (if quieter about it).

Today is official 'celebration and feast' day, and then the day after tomorrow, the tribe will split again and everyone in Aehako's cave will begin the journey home. I'm not looking forward to that. My stuff's still in Bek's cave, but I could care less about a few furs and

some woven baskets. I can move back into the bachelorette cave with Tiffany and Josie. When we get home, there won't be any excuses for me to avoid talking to Bek, though. There will be no soccer games to watch, no Christmas carol sing alongs, no root-cakes made like latkes to include Nora. Things will go back to their normal quiet. Even if Harlow manages to open up several caves, there will be lots of rock to clear out, and no one will be ready to move in for a few months.

Worst of all? Ereven lives in Vektal's cave and I don't.

It's weird how we've only been here for about a week and I already am dreading leaving him behind. Fact is, I love being around him. Ereven's thoughtful and witty. He makes clever comments that tell me there's a lot going on underneath that calm expression. He sometimes skips playing soccer and lounges near me while I hang out with Tiffany and Josie, and his hand goes around my leg, casually possessive. Just that small touch makes me feel all flushed and excited.

He hasn't tried to kiss me again. Or nuzzle me. Or anything. I find myself praying for a few stolen moments where we might find each other alone and I can fling my arms around him and see if he wants to kiss me back. But I'm not quite that brave, and we never seem to be alone. Someone's always nearby.

Like right now. Stacy, our cook, has made herself in charge of the latkes for our feast, even though Nora is with the sa-kohtsk hunt. Ereven has brought in a few plump scythe-beaks to act as our 'turkeys' and Megan and I have been working on plucking and then stuffing them with some of the endless piles of herbs that have appeared in the caves the last few days. Ereven lingered for a few minutes, but when it was obvious we'd get no alone time, he headed off to join into the day's soccer match.

I try to hide my disappointment. It's too early for me to be in another relationship. Then I remember that it's not a real relationship, and I feel even worse. I have a crush on a guy that's just pretending to like me. I'm such a sad sack. I should be all happy and independent, but all I can think about is Ereven and how nice he is, and how good he looks when he smiles.

“So are you giving any presents out?” Josie asks me as she yanks a handful of feathers from the fat dead bird-thing on her lap. Scythe-beaks aren’t exactly birds like we think of them on Earth, but they’re close enough and have feathers, so they’re birds in my mind. Besides, calling them cat-lizard-bird-things is tough, especially when my brain keeps trying to determine what part of the genetic jigsaw is what. ‘Bird’ just seems easiest. And tastiest.

“Me?”

She rolls her eyes. “No, the bird in your lap. Hey bird, are you giving out any presents today?”

“I’m going to wallop you with this bird,” I tease her. “And... maybe.”

“Ooooh. For Ereven?” She wiggles her eyebrows at me. “I’ve seen you two getting cozy a lot. And you eat him up with your eyes every time he comes around.”

“I do not!” The hot blush on my cheeks says otherwise, though. Am I so obvious about the fact that I’m crazy-attracted to him? We’ve been keeping our fake relationship low key (except when Bek is around) but I’m oddly pleased that others have noticed. Truth is, I have been working on a gift for Ereven. I stayed up late last night to finish it. His cloak is warm but worn, and the hood on it is worn and tattered. I’ve made him a new one with a thick fur lining, cut-outs for his horns, and a bit of decorated stitching around the edge. It’s not much, but I don’t have much. I feel weird discussing it around Josie, so I change the subject back to her. “You get any presents?”

“Me? No. Tiff’s busy racking up all the men in the tribe.” She grins. “I think at last count, her suitor list is up to four. Maybe five.”

“Poor thing,” I drawl.

Josie giggles. “Right? You’d think it’s the worst thing in the world the way she’s acting. She’s hiding out with Maylak right now, going out to pick herbs. Like we don’t have enough herbs?” She gestures at the overflowing bowl at her side. She’s right, we have more than enough. “It’s just so she can get out and hide for a few hours.”

“What about Haeden?” I ask. I remember him knocking down Rokan in the soccer match.

“Giving me a present? Girl, please.” Josie snorts and viciously rips another handful of feathers from her bird. “The only present I

could see that man giving me is a bag of flaming poo. You know we hate each other, right?"

"Mmmhmm." They do seem quite vocal about it. Still, I think there's something there. They profess to hate each other but seem to end up in the other's company quite a bit.

"Seriously. I hate the guy and he hates me." She plucks another feather. "I think if we ended up resonating, it'd be the end of the world or something."

I say nothing, because I know that feeling. It's how I feel when I think of what would happen if I resonated to Bek. I'm lucky that for whatever reason, my khui hasn't kicked in and made me resonate. Maybe it's just being choosier than most. Maybe it knows that Bek is bad for me.

Maybe the darn thing's better at relationships than I am. I denude my bird of feathers as Josie chatters on and on about how irritating Haeden is. I listen to her talk, murmuring an acknowledgment every now and then. I finish my bird, help her finish hers, and then we rub them down with fat, stuff them with herbs, and spit them over the fire pit to slow roast. By the time we're done, we're both messy and gross.

"Ugh, I need soap," Josie comments, wiping her hands on her dirty tunic. "And I'm out. Let me go check storage for some berries."

"I'll wait here," I tell her, slowly turning one of the spits so the birds can brown evenly on both sides. The sa-khui don't care for cooked meat, but they're curious about our holiday meals. There's going to be so much scythe-beak that everyone's going to get a taste. Nearby, Stacy is cooking root-latke after root-latke in her greased makeshift skillet. They must be good, because every so often, little Esha toddles in and asks for one.

There's no sign of Ereven in the caves, so he must be outside playing more soccer. I think about him, his sweaty hair clinging to his neck, and feel the oddest shiver of desire ripple through me. Wow. I haven't had sex in months - good sex in a lot, lot longer - and I'm surprised at the force of my need. Bek was all right at first, but the moment I moved into his cave, he stopped trying and the sex got abrupt and unsatisfying. The other women go on and on about their mates and their spurs, but maybe Bek's deficient in that area,

because all it ever did was jab me in uncomfortable places. I wonder about Ereven's spur. Then I feel a bit like a perv for thinking about it.

We're just friends and he's doing me a favor. I'm crazy to torture myself like this. In two days, I'm going back to my cave and he's staying here. Who knows when we'll see each other again?

Harlow's cutter starts up, a high pitched whine that soon turns louder and louder. Rukh stalks out of the cave with baby Rukhar cradled against his chest, the baby's ears covered with fur mufflers. The incessant drone of the cutter seems to get louder and louder, the sound becoming more grating as it cuts into rock. I grit my teeth and give the scythe-beaks on the spit another turn. Stacy looks over at me and says something, but I can't hear her. I tap my ear to indicate it, and she rolls her eyes and waves a hand, telling me never mind.

Something appears out of the corner of my eye. It's so loud in the cavern that I didn't hear the person approach, and I jump, startled.

It's a necklace. Pretty bones have been bleached and dyed and carved into different shapes, then strung on a leather cord. It's beautiful. The hand that holds it, though?

Bek.

My stomach knots unhappily. I look at the necklace and feel a lot of guilt. It clearly took him a lot of time. He wants me back. That's obvious. But I feel so much better without him that I know I can't, no matter how guilty I feel at the thought of hurting him. I need to talk to him and get everything out in the open. He's not a bad man. I know he's not. He's just high-strung and overbearing, and I'm such a wuss that I'm the last person he should be with.

So I touch his arm and point at the cave entrance. We can talk outside, where we should be able to hear ourselves think.

He offers me the necklace once more.

Again, I ignore it. Instead, I get to my feet, wipe my hands off on a thin leather towel, and then head out. I look behind me to see if he's following, and he is, but there's a fierce frown on his face that doesn't bode well.

Yeah, I'm guessing he doesn't want to hear a break-up conversation. I mentally steel myself. Too bad, because he's going to have one. I walk out at his side. In moments, we're out in the

crunching snow, and as always, the brisk air takes my breath away. Even with the twin suns up, it's still bitterly cold on the ice planet. Always. Nearby, there's a game of soccer going on, and Farli flings herself at old Vadren, trying to distract him away from kicking the next goal. Ereven's out on the field with the others, laughing. Most of the fit hunters are out on the sa-kohtsk hunt, and the field is populated with the elderly and the few tribal women. There're a few men that have lingered behind - Bek, obviously, and Ereven, though I'm puzzled as to why he stayed. Maybe he's more into the holiday spirit than I realized and wanted to celebrate more than hunt.

We head along the cliff wall, staying out of the wind, until we're a good distance away from both soccer players and the cave entrance. Out here, Harlow's cutter is only an annoying hum, not an ear-splitting screech. On a distant ridge, I see Rukh walking, his son cradled against his chest, keeping him away from the noise as well. I'm not dressed for the cold, wearing only a loose leather tunic and leggings, but I'm hoping this won't take long. And if it does, I have a good excuse to go inside.

I cross my arms over my chest and look at Bek. "We need to talk."

He holds the necklace out to me. "I worked many hours on this."

"And it's very pretty. You're really talented." I gentle my voice to hide my annoyance, and push it back toward him. "But I can't take it from you. I don't want to be with you anymore. Please understand. I'm not trying to hurt you. I'm just...not wanting the same things out of the relationship that you do."

Bek scowls. He flings the necklace into the snow. "You are my mate—"

"I'm not," I butt in. "We never resonated. I doubt we ever will. There's nothing that ties us together except shared living quarters and feelings, and right now there are neither."

"You are being impossible," he snarls, looming closer. "Is this another one of your human rituals that I am not understanding? Are you saying this to anger me?"

I refuse to back down. He can growl and stalk all he wants, but I'm not going back to him. "I'm trying to be nice about this, Bek. We are still part of the same tribe and that's not changing. I just don't

want to be your fur-warmer anymore, okay? Let's be honest with each other. You don't want me, either. You find me annoying. You think I'm useless. You hate it when I cry. There's a long list of things I do that annoy you. I think you just don't want to lose me because having a mate is some sort of pride thing. But we're really not good for each other, I promise you." Gosh, I'm talking so much I'm sounding like Josie. "Can't we just agree to part as friends and not make this hard?"

"I am not your friend," Bek sneers. "I am your mate, and you are mine." He leans closer, and he's practically got me pinned against the rock wall. My heart starts to hammer, anxiety ratcheting through me. Bek leans in --

And then is shoved viciously aside.

Ereven's there, standing over Bek, who's fallen into the snow. His normally calm face is full of fury, and his lips are pulled back in a snarl, revealing sharp fangs.

"She said no, Bek. Leave her alone."

Bek slowly picks himself up off the ground, glaring at Ereven as if he's the problem and not me. "I see she has already moved on to another's furs. You think she won't tire of you like she did me, Ereven?"

I laugh. Both men turn to look at me, but I can't help it. The idea strikes me as completely ludicrous. Even though I haven't been close with Ereven for long, I've seen his good heart. I know he'd never try to grind me down like Bek has. With Bek, all the signals were there, but I willfully ignored them, believing that I needed safety more than love.

Now that I'm safe, I want more.

Bek scowls at my laughter. I try to stop it, but my heart's racing as if I've just ran miles. I'm pretty sure my feet haven't moved an inch, though. It just pounds and pounds, and I put a hand to my breast, willing myself to calm down. Bek has the picture now. I can see it on his face. Ereven's made it clear he won't let me be messed with, and Bek only likes to bully those who don't stand up for themselves.

As my ex-mate picks himself up from the snow and stalks away, Ereven turns to me. He cups my face in his hands and scans me as

if I'm something precious he's worried got damaged. "Are you well, Claire?"

I nod.

He leans in and brushes his lips over mine, an act that startles me. Sa-khui have to be taught what kissing is. I'm surprised that he knows to kiss me.

Actually, I'm surprised that he's kissing me, too.

"Do not go back," Ereven says, and he sounds as breathless as I feel. "When the others leave, stay with me, in my cave."

My eyes widen. "I thought you were just pretending." Now my heart starts hammering all over again. It's pulsing so loud I swear everyone's going to hear it over Harlow's ever-grinding rock cutter.

"Pretending?"

"Pretending to like me. To court me."

His brows draw together and he looks upset. "Do you think we were pretending, Claire? I asked if I could court you. You said yes."

Oh. I'm so stupid. He did ask. I'd just assumed...well, that he was doing it to be nice. Not because he liked me. When he pulls away, I grab his hands. "Wait. No, I'm glad." He pauses, and I rush on. "I thought, you know, that I was liking you and you were just being... nice."

"Nice?" He releases one of my hands and clenches a fist over his heart. "Nice? The sight of you makes my heart pound as if a dozen dvisti run inside my breast."

Funny, I'm pounding the same way. And I feel flushed, and excited. Kind of...excited all over. Tingly. On a hunch, I put a hand to his chest, covering his heart.

At the same moment, we both begin to purr.

CLAIRE

I gasp. It seems unbelievable. The timing couldn't be more perfect, but there it is.

We're resonating, Ereven and I. We're to be mates. My khui has chosen his. My mouth hangs open in surprise, and I'm resonating so loud I can hear the purr coming from my throat. It's so...strange. Strange and yet, perfect.

Ereven's hand goes over mine, and he clasps it against his breast. His mouth curves into a smile, and it broadens, wider and wider, until he's grinning ear to ear. "It seems our khuis have decided we are taking too long to get together."

I laugh, giggles overtaking me. "I guess so." Oh, I'm so happy. I feel...complete. And it's not just the resonance, it's Ereven. It's knowing we're linked, that we're meant to be together. It feels so right. "I can't believe it—"

"I can," he says, utterly serious. He reaches out and caresses my cheek. "I've been drawn to you ever since I met you. Ever since you came to this place."

Ever since...but it's been over a year. Longer than that, even. My jaw drops again. "But, why did you never say anything?"

"You immediately went to Bek." He shrugs. "I wanted you to be happy more than anything, and you seemed happy with him."

I shake my head and put my hands on him. I can't seem to stop putting my hands on him, actually, and I love the feel of his slightly sweaty skin under my fingertips. "I went with him because I was scared and he seemed interested. I never...saw you." For some

reason, this makes me weepy. Hot tears rush forward and I begin to cry. “God, that sounds so awful, but it’s true. I never saw you, Ereven. I never paid attention. And I spent a year with him—“

“Hush,” he tells me, tenderly brushing aside my tears. “It happened as it did, and I have no regrets, because you are mine now, and no one can interfere.”

I’m not so sure about that. “Bek—“

“Even Bek’s stubbornness is no match for resonance. He has lost you.” Ereven leans in close and pulls me against him, and his nose nuzzles mine. “You are mine and I am yours.”

Oh, I like the sound of that. Impulsively, I tilt my face up to his, and press my mouth against his. He kisses with his mouth closed, which tells me he’s never really kissed before. There’re lots of things I can show this man. My hands twine in his tangled hair as his arms go around my waist, and I coax his lips into parting with small nibbles and flicks of my tongue.

When I delicately stroke inside his mouth, he stiffens and pulls back, clearly surprised.

“Did you not like that?” I ask, hesitant.

His cheeks seem to flush a darker hue of blue. Is he blushing? “I liked it far too much. I just did not know...” his voice trails off. “Can we do it again?” he blurts after a moment’s thought. “With the tongues?”

“We can do it with tongues as much as you want.” And I show him just how much. I don’t think of myself as the world’s best kisser, but with Ereven? It doesn’t matter. He loves every caress of my mouth against his, every brush of my tongue. Even when our teeth clash together, it’s still sexy. He responds with enthusiasm and soon mimics my kisses with his mouth and tongue, and then I lose myself in him, moaning as his mouth conquers mine in a way that leaves me utterly breathless and full of need. Our chests, pressed together, practically vibrate with the force of our humming khuis.

My khui isn’t the only thing humming. My body feels pulsing and alive with Ereven’s touch. I feel as if I’m waking up for the first time - being with Bek was nothing like this. Not even close. It’s like comparing Kool-Aid and wine. One’s rich and velvety and delicious, and one’s just...red. My nipples ache under my clothing, and there’s

a tingle between my thighs that feels as if it's been a long time coming. I want this man, horns, blue skin, sharp teeth and all. We continue to kiss, devouring each other with our lips.

As if he can read my thoughts, Ereven hefts me into his arms, lifting my feet from the ground. Our mouths are still locked together. He starts walking up the ridge, and I pull my mouth from his hot kisses, surprised. "Wh-where are we going?"

"We are going to mate," he tells me, and nips at my lower lip.

It sends a tingle shooting through my body and I have to bite back my moan. "Where?"

"Somewhere private. I am not going back to that cavern, not while it's brimming with people."

He's got a point. But I'm cold, and I haven't exactly dressed for the elements. "Somewhere warm?"

The look in his eyes is scorching. "I'll keep you warm."

I shiver with need. I just bet he will.

Resonance hums through us and each step seems to take a million years to complete. I can't stop kissing him; my mouth moves against his jaw, his cheekbone, his neck, his ear. I never want to stop kissing him. Then I'm filled with joy when I realize that he's mine now, and I never have to stop kissing him. Ever.

I look up from tonguing Ereven's ear when I realize we've stopped moving. We're in a small copse of the pink, flimsy trees, with the high walls of the cliffs surrounding us. The wind is less here, but there's still snow and open air. Is this where we're stopping? I open my mouth to ask, and as I do, Ereven pulls me against him and buries his face against my breasts.

And I moan, forgetting all about my reservations. I don't care where we have sex, just as long as it's *soon*.

Ereven sets me gently on the ground, and his hand goes to the laces on the sides of my tunic that fit it close to my body. While he pulls at them, I rip at the laces on his leggings. I'm desperate to touch him. The moment I free his cock, I moan again, because God, he's got some nice equipment. I'm no shy virgin - wasn't on Earth, either - and I love the look of a gorgeous cock. His is perfection itself, slightly curving up so it'll hit me in all the right spots. The head is thick, and as I stroke his shaft with my hand, I notice he's nice and

thick, a vein tracing along under the skin. His spur is longer than any I've ever seen, and I feel a shiver of excitement at the sight of it. Now that? That has potential.

Like all sa-khui men, his cock is ribbed (for my pleasure!) and ridged. My mouth waters at the sight of it. I want to put my tongue all over him, but there's time enough for that later. For now, we need to satisfy our khuis - and our own longings.

His breath hisses out as I touch him, and his mouth captures mine again. My tongue slicks along his and I match my strokes of his cock with the movements of my mouth.

"Your hands," he murmurs into my mouth. "Never did I think I could imagine such pleasure." He pushes into my leggings and finds the wet heat of my sex, and slides his fingers into me.

I cling to him, desperate for more. "Please, Ereven." My khui's throbbing so hard in my chest I feel as if I'm about to split apart. "Need you."

"Take off your clothes," he tells me.

I release him and do as he asks, tearing at laces and stripping away leather as fast as I can. I need him. I want him. I'll die if I don't feel his warm skin against mine in the next moment. By the time I finish stripping, he's naked, too. I press my body against his, not caring if he thinks my tits are small or my hips too wide. Somehow, I suspect he'll think I'm just fine. I know I can't find any fault with his long, lean body and the taut muscles under his blue skin. I itch to put my hands on him, imagining how soft and velvety his skin will feel against mine.

Then he pulls me against him, and drags one of my legs up his thigh, holding it against his hip. It forces me to change my balance, until I'm pressing against his cock, and my pussy is open and ready for him.

He grabs a fistful of my hair with his other hand and tilts my head back. "My beautiful mate," he murmurs, and licks the cords of my throat gently.

Oh God, I'm going to melt against him. I cling to him, wrapping my arms around his neck. My breasts push against his chest, and the soft suede of his skin contrasts against the rough, thick plating that protects his arms and the center of his chest.

“Want you inside me,” I pant. I’m desperate and greedy for him, and I absolutely do not care. I need him like I need air, and if I don’t get stuffed full of him in the next moment, I might start screaming. I’m sure some of that is my khui. I’m not sure if I should thank it or grind my teeth with frustration.

Ereven releases my hair and his other hand goes to my hip. He grips me, and before I can demand that he throw me on the ground and screw me, he lifts me up and then sinks my spread pussy down onto his cock.

All the breath escapes my lungs. Just like that, I’m speared deeply onto him. My entire body jerks in response, and my arms tighten around his neck. He’s so much bigger than I am, and so strong that it’s nothing for him to lift me up and hold me like this, to fuck me standing up.

And oh God, just being like this is amazing. A thousand sensations are going off inside my body, and I cling to him, overwhelmed. My khui’s purring encouragement, and I can hear Ereven’s breath rasping in my ear. He shifts on his feet, just a little, and my entire body lights up again. His spur presses up against my clit, and I want to squirm against it. Actually, I want to squirm against all of him, just because how good it’ll feel.

Instead, I lock my feet behind his back, holding tighter onto him. “Please,” I whisper again. My mind’s going to explode from sheer pleasure if he thrusts even once, but I need it. *Need* it.

He growls my name out and lifts me, then thrusts me back down onto his cock.

A scream erupts from my throat. Pure sensation flares through my body, and I’ve never felt anything like this. Even the smallest twitch of his body against mine sends me flying. When he rocks into me again, it’s like I feel every ridge dragging through me, and my eyes nearly roll back in my head from the pleasure of it.

Ereven thrusts into me over and over, and each one feels better than the last. I cling to him with all my strength, my entire body tightening as sensation builds. I’m going to come soon, and I’m going to come really hard. I can feel my entire body tensing in preparation for the orgasm, and yet I’m still shocked when it explodes through me with the force of a hurricane. I hold onto him for

dear life as my pussy clenches around his cock, and when he rams into me again, it sends me into an entirely new spiral. I cry out as the second, even more violent orgasm rips through me.

He growls and then the next thing I know, I'm on my back in the snow with my legs in the air. He bends over me, cock still buried deep inside me, and claims my mouth in a breathless kiss. I barely have the strength to kiss him back before he thrusts into me again. His spur rubs my clit, and oh God, I'm going to die from orgasms, because I start to lock up around him all over again. He's close to coming, though, and with his next thrust, Ereven pushes my legs up until my knees are practically at my ears. He hammers into me, over and over again, and then I'm screaming yet again as I come for a third time, unable to help myself. I barely hear my name hissed out on his breath as he comes, but I feel his body shudder over mine, and the hot wash of his come inside me.

When he collapses on top of me, I feel utterly dazed. Like someone broke me apart and left the pieces in the snow. My khui's purring cheerfully, as if my entire body wasn't just decimated by lust not five seconds ago.

Those were, individually, the three best orgasms I'd ever had in my life. To have them all three together in rapid-fire succession? My brain can't process it. All I can do is cling to Ereven's warm body and thank all the stars in the sky that I have this man.

This? This is what resonance is. Anything else is a pale second to it.

Ereven drags himself up on his elbows and gazes down at me. I'm sweaty, my backside is cold thanks to the snow, and I'm probably drooling on myself, my brain is so spent. "My beautiful mate," he murmurs, and leans in to kiss me gently. "This is my happiest moment ever."

Mine, too.



WE RETURN to the tribal caves several hours later, hand in hand. My tunic has a few rips from our enthusiasm, and Ereven has to hold the

waist of his leggings up because I might have torn the cords in my haste. Not sorry. We're both grinning like loons and I feel happier than I've ever been.

Tired, too, but that doesn't matter.

"When Vektal gets back," Ereven tells me, "We will let him know we need a cave of our own."

"Maybe one of the new ones Harlow dug out," I say, feeling shy but excited about it. Sharing a cave with Bek felt like being trapped. But the thought of spending my days and nights with Ereven fills me with joy and hope.

As we walk inside, I can hear someone singing a Christmas carol at the top of their lungs. It's Ariana, paired with Josie. The scent of cooked food fills the air, and everyone's gathered around the tree. People eat the feast and I see presents everywhere, along with more sprigs of leaves. Looks like we've missed a lot of the holiday celebrations. I can't say I'm terribly sad about it, because I've gotten something much better.

"There you are," Aehako says, coming up from behind us and clapping a hand on Ereven's back. "I was about to send a party out to search for you two. There's a creature howling like a rabid snow-cat off in the hills. Best be careful." He grins at Ereven.

Someone nearby hoots with laughter.

My face gets hot. So I might have been a bit noisy. Sounds like we were overheard. I don't care. I'm happy. I squeeze Ereven's hand. "We should probably change clothes."

He pulls me close and kisses me. "Do not be gone long."

"I won't." I want a chance to get his present, too. I hope he likes it.

When I get to Megan's cave, Liz and Josie are there. Josie's putting on a new tunic, and the hem is embroidered with thick, upraised designs that I've seen Liz working on for the last few weeks. It's sweet of her to make a present for Josie, when it's likely she wouldn't receive one at all. Tiffany's been showered with presents over the last few days, and I never thought about how Josie might feel.

Liz gives me a knowing look as I enter, and she laces up Josie's back. Josie has her face turned to the wall, her hair held up in one

hand, and doesn't see me come in. "Welcome back, Claire," Liz says, then pushes a lace through a hole in the tunic. "I see you got your Christmas present. Hold still, Josie."

"What kind of present did she get?" Josie asks, excited.

"Looks like the kind that keeps on giving."

"Huh?" Josie says.

"Special sauce for her all beef patties," Liz says. "Bit of clotted cream for her spotted dick. Hot dog for her buns. Need I go on with the food metaphors?"

Josie giggles. "Oh. I get it now."

I ignore them as I move to my pack and strip off my old tunic in exchange for a new one and fresh leggings. I can still smell Ereven on my skin, and it fills me with joy. I change quickly and grab the small package of Ereven's hood, then head back out to the main cave with it.

Bek stops me before I can walk a few feet further from Megan's cave.

I cross my arms over my chest protectively and give him a wary look. I don't want him to ruin my happiness.

He sighs and raises a hand in the air. "Truce, Claire."

"Truce," I repeat, reluctant.

"I heard you resonate. Both of you. I was close enough to hear it, and saw your faces." For a moment, he looks bitterly sad, and then quickly masks it again. "I am happy for you and I wish you well. I just wanted you to know that I am leaving in the morning, and will pack your things for you. You can pick them up when you and Ereven visit the caves again."

"Thank you," I say quietly. "I'm sorry if it hurt you."

His smile is bitter, reluctant. "I cannot be hurt. Resonance cannot be controlled, and it explains why you were drawn so quickly to him. I wish you much happiness." He nods at me once, and then disappears into the shadows.

I feel a pang of sadness. It's clear that he's lonely and unhappy, but I can't be what he needs. I clutch Ereven's present to my chest. I belong to someone else now, and he belongs to me.

As I head toward the central part of the caves, Ereven is there, waiting for me. His smile is brilliant and he holds a small, wrapped

package against his chest — a present for me. Christmas carols fill the air and the thin tree shivers, the garlands tinkling like a thousand beads. The air is crisp with the hint of more snow to come, and the scent of warm food entices me forward. The murmur of voices and soft laughter fills the cavern, and I've never felt more at home or more at peace than I am in this moment.

"Happy holidays," I tell my new mate as I press my gift into his hands.

"There is more than one?" He asks, surprised.

I nod, smiling. On Earth, there are many, many holidays. Here, there's just the one we've made for ourselves, but it somehow seems more special than all the Valentine's Days or Thanksgivings I've had in the past thrown together. Because there's love and family and Eeven, and a bright new future waiting for me.

Ice planet holidays are the best.

THE ICE PLANET BARBARIANS SERIES

Ice Planet Barbarians (Georgie's story)

Book 1 – now available on KINDLE UNLIMITED! [Click here to borrow.](#)

You'd think being abducted by aliens would be the worst thing that could happen to me. And you'd be wrong. Because now, the aliens are having ship trouble, and they've left their cargo of human women - including me - on an ice planet.

And the only native inhabitant I've met? He's big, horned, blue, and really, really has a thing for me...

Barbarian Alien (Liz's story)

Book 2 – Now Available in KINDLE UNLIMITED! [Click here to borrow.](#)

Twelve humans are left stranded on a wintry alien planet. I'm one of them. Yay, me.

In order to survive, we have to take on a symbiont that wants to rewire our bodies to live in this brutal place. I like to call it a cootie. And my cootie's a jerk, because it also thinks I'm the mate to the biggest, surliest alien of the group.

Barbarian Lover (Kira's story)

Book 3 – Now Available on Kindle Unlimited! [Click here to borrow.](#)

As one of the few humans stranded on the ice planet, I should be happy that I have a new home. Human women are treasured here, and one alien in particular has made it clear that he wants me. It's hard to push away the sexy, flirtatious Aehako, when all I want to do is grab him by his horns and insist he take me to his furs.

But I've got a terrible secret - the aliens who abducted me are back, and thanks to the translator in my ear, they can find me. My presence here endangers everyone...but can I give up my new life and the man I want more than anything?

Barbarian Mine (Harlow's story)

Book 4 – Now Available on Kindle Unlimited! [Click here to borrow.](#)

The ice planet has given me a second lease on life, so I'm thrilled to be here. Sure, there's no cheeseburgers, but I'm healthy and ready to be a productive member of the small tribe. What I didn't anticipate? That there'd be a savage stranger waiting nearby, watching me. And when he takes me captive, the unthinkable happens...I resonate to him.

Resonance means mating, and children...but I don't know if this guy's ever been around anyone before. He's truly a barbarian in all ways, right down to clubbing me over the head and claiming me as his own.

So why is it that I crave his touch and hunger for more?

NEED MORE ALPHA, OUT OF THIS WORLD HEROES?

Alpha Alien by Flora Dare

[Available in Kindle Unlimited! Free to borrow!](#)

He's big, he's scaly and he thinks we're lifemates!

I've always felt a little bit...off. Out of step with everyone else. All I wanted was to find my place in life.

That's how I found myself in the middle of the desert, guns blazing. And that's when he found me.

Now I'm billions of miles from home with a scary space-lizard who doesn't take no for an answer. What's worse is, I don't want to say no.



He growled under his breath and let go of my legs. He was so tall my feet dangled - I still had no control over my body. In that moment, I'm afraid I was more likely to wrap my legs around him than I was to try to run.

He pressed me against the wall and another wave of hot desire flooded me. I could feel every delicious inch of his body, it was hard and hot against me. Desire and panic fought to share the same space in my body.

His lips captured mine and for one glorious moment, my body sang against his. For the first time in my life, I felt truly and

completely connected to another being on an absolutely soul-shattering level.

It was like losing part of my body, when he ripped his lips away from mine and said, "I've been searching for you for years and it turns out, you're a stupid, fragile human."

NEED MORE ALIEN HOLIDAYS?

Check out Celia Kyle (writing as Erin Tate) and the Ujal!

DASHING THROUGH THE STARS

The holidays are a time of love, joy, and... meeting a new alien species?

Prince of the Ujal, Tave fa V'yl-Zeret, will do anything to make his mate happy. Even if that means celebrating a holiday he does not understand. (Tave does not care what human lore states, a single human could not circle the globe and deliver toys to every child.)

This year's biggest concern isn't whether he purchased enough toys for his youngling, but the alien battleship that enters Earth's orbit.

Are they friend? Or foe? Will Tave's family and friends live to see Christmas morning? Or will they all perish on Christmas Eve? For there is a humbug willing to go to any lengths to stop peace talks. Lengths that include kidnapping royalty and... assassination.



“Tave,” she sighed his name and released him, slowly lowering back to the mattress.

“*Pyabi*. My Rina. My mate.” He still could not believe she chose him. Still could not believe the life they led. This moment, this second in time, was why he breathed. To have this closeness with his

female, to have joy in his heart and a family to call his own...
Priceless.

“Make love to me.”

“Always,” he murmured and retreated, sliding his cock from her pussy before thrusting deeply once more. He repeated the motion, changing the angle of his hips and then... Rina released a deep groan, telling him he'd found the perfect approach to pleasuring his mate.

With a roll of his hips, he set up a smooth rhythm, one that would drive them both mad with the pleasure but wouldn't shove them over the edge into the joyful abyss. He wanted to draw out their lovemaking, take the time they did not usually have. The entire station shut down for a full week during the holidays and he would revel in every spare moment with Rina.

She wrapped one leg around his waist while the other foot remained on the mattress, and then she worked in concert with him. They set their own pace, the glide of their bodies smooth and sinuous. Bliss rose within him, pleasure plucking his veins with every milking squeeze of her sheath. Her pussy spasmed, tightening and fluttering against his shaft. His balls drew up tight and hard against this body.

“Rina...” he panted her name, cock demanding release yet he would not unless she was with him.

“Yes... Soon. More.”

So he gave her what she needed. Gave her more. Gave her everything until he thought he'd explode.

And then...

“I want Mommy an' Daddy!”

WANT MORE ICE BARBARIANS?

For more information about upcoming books in the Ice Planet Barbarians series (or any other books by Ruby Dixon), like me on [Facebook](#) or [subscribe to my new release newsletter](#). There's more to come! Next up is Tiffany in BARBARIAN'S PRIZE, in which several men compete for her heart...but the one to win it might not be the one she expects!

It should be out in early 2016!

Thanks for reading!

<3 Ruby

Ice Planet Holiday

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