

author of Ice Planet Barbarians

RUBY DIXON

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HAVING THE
BARBARIAN'S

ICE
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BABY

HAVING THE BARBARIAN'S BABY

ICE PLANET BARBARIANS: A SLICE OF LIFE

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CONTENTS

[Having the Barbarian's Baby](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Author's Note](#)

[The People of Ice Planet Barbarians](#)

[The Ice Planet Barbarians Series](#)

[Want more?](#)

[Boring Copyright Stuff](#)

HAVING THE BARBARIAN'S BABY

Megan's ready to give birth, but she's not ready to let her mate leave her side. When Cashol must go hunting to feed the tribe, they're separated for the first time since resonance. Not a problem, except the baby's ready to be born and there's a storm brewing...

This is a short story set in the ICE PLANET BARBARIANS world. It does not stand alone, and is intended to be read after BARBARIAN'S MATE. It's a little bit of sweetness for those that can't get enough of the big blue aliens! Happy reading!

MEGAN

The tea over the communal fire is ready, so I lean over with my favorite bone cup in hand to dip it in.

Josie immediately bounces to her feet. “You want me to get that for you, Meggers?”

“I’m good,” I say, and brace my feet a little wider apart to steady myself so I don’t tumble, belly-first, into the fire pit. I’m a billion months pregnant - slight exaggeration - and ungainly, but I can still get my own tea.

“You can get mine, Josie,” Nora says as I dip my cup and then waddle back to my seat. “I’m a bit busy at the moment.”

Josie giggles at that understatement and takes Nora’s cup from the flat rock nearby where it’s waiting. Nora’s busy all right; Anna and Elsa are demanding babies and she’s currently nursing one, the other cradled on her knees. Poor Nora. She’s up with me and Josie - the tribe early-birds - before the wee hours of dawn because of the babies. Not that she looks unhappy. There’s a pleased but sleepy smile on her face as Elsa nurses and Anna waves her arms around. I don’t blame Nora for being happy - her twins are cute as buttons.

My stomach growls and I decide to doctor my tea a bit. Josie sets Nora’s tea-cup down and fills her own, then sits across from me and cradles it in her hands, blowing on the surface to cool it. Me? I pick up my bag and take out a pouch of *hraku*, the sweet, toffee-flavored

baked seeds that are such a tasty treat. And I crush them in my hand and add the sprinkles to my hot tea, because the tea here on the ice planet is pretty bitter.

And then, because I'm pregnant as hell, I add some *kah*, the ultra-spicy, peppery meat-and-fat-and-seed trail rations to the mix and give my cup a swig.

Nora makes a gagging sound. "You are not going to drink that, are you?"

"It's a bit like jalapeño oatmeal with caramel once the tea gets absorbed," I tell her, watching my cup. "Ate three cupfuls of it yesterday."

"That sounds horrid."

Josie just looks at me, fascinated. "How long do you think before I get pregnancy cravings?"

"I didn't get any," Nora says, gently pulling Elsa from her left breast and then switching her to the other side. "You might not, either."

"Oh man, I hope I do," Josie breathes, then takes a sip of her tea. "I want to experience everything pregnancy has to offer."

I set my cup down, since my breakfast-sludge is still concocting, and stretch my legs out. My favorite stool - a super-overstuffed leather pillow - doesn't provide much back support and I need it lately. I put my hands to my lower back and rub at the ache there. "Give it time, Jo," I tell her. "You'll be pregnant for fourteen or fifteen months, so you'll have lots of time to experience it all." I'm trying not to be a crank-pot about things. Josie's excited. She's wanted babies for forever and a day and she's finally resonated to her own mate. She's about a month along and is eager for everything - morning sickness, the bloating, the swollen ankles, you name it.

Me? I've been pregnant for oh, fourteen months already and I'm way, way ready to be done.

I glance over at the front of the cave, near Vektal and Georgie's place. My mate, Cashol, disappeared in there to chat with his chief about something, despite the ultra-early hour. And he's been in there for about twenty minutes, long enough for Josie to build a fire, for tea to be put on, and for me to notice that he's still freaking talking to the chief.

I'm nervous. I don't know why, but I am. Vektal's a great guy and Georgie's a sweetheart, but I'm about a month away from giving birth and the last thing I want is for someone to be assigning my mate some 'special' project that takes him out of the caves. I have a sneaking suspicion that that's what it is; Haeden - bless his surly, surly heart - commented the other day about how all the hunters go on long, extended hunts except for my mate. And he's not wrong.

I mean, I have my flaws. And my biggest one? I'm clingy as fuck. I acknowledge it. Doesn't mean I'm changing, but I'm aware of it. But I still wonder if Haeden's comment made its way back to the chief and that's why my mate's been gone for so long. As if agreeing, the baby in my stomach kicks hard, and my stomach growls in the next second. All right, all right. I know when someone needs a snack.

With one last glance back at the chief's cave, I pick up my 'tea', blow on it, and then tip the oily sludge into my mouth. The different flavors hit me all at once - the wasabi-like taste of the *kah*, followed by the sweet caramel of the *hraku*, and then the tart bitterness of the tea. Heaven. There's even notes of meat and fat in there. Yum.

Nora makes another gagging sound. Josie just giggles.

"You wait until you have a craving for peanut butter and pickles," I tell Josie as I take another sip/slurp. "And then you remember that the ice planet doesn't have either. Kah-hraku-soup is gonna look pretty good then."

"Just not yet," Nora says drily. She pulls Elsa from her breast and begins to pat the baby's back, as Anna stirs in her lap.

Josie immediately puts out her hands. "Can I hold one?"

"Sure." Nora hesitates, trying to decide which baby to hand over, her arms full. After a moment, she hands over Elsa.

Josie pulls the baby against her, a look of bliss on her face. She's so excited to be pregnant, and I'm happy for her. I know she's been lonely for a long time. I rub a hand on my aching back again. For a while, I'd almost felt guilty that I'd resonated to my sweet Cashol... almost. Except I wouldn't give him up for anything. Josie's like a kid sister to me and I hated to leave her behind, but when it comes to my mate? All bets are off.

He's mine and mine alone, and I wouldn't give him up for anything.

Josie starts to talk again and I take another sip of my tea-soup and look over at the chief's cave. My mate's still in there? I'm tempted to get up and go push into the conversation, but...getting up is an effort lately. I rub a hand on my belly absently and drink more tea as Josie chatters Nora's ear off.

I'm tipping back my cup to finish the dregs when a familiar pair of shoulders and long dark hair catches my eye. God, my mate is gorgeous. I'm so stinking lucky. When we got to the ice planet, I didn't see how I could possibly fall in love with an alien, but the moment I resonated with Cashol? Everything clicked into place. It was like a switch went on with my brain, and instead of freaking out over horns and tails, I realized how graceful his big blue body was. I learned that there was nothing finer than the crooked smile on my mate's mouth when he makes me laugh. I learned that his hair's always slightly messy because he's too focused on other things - like me - to care about the fact that the braids that keep the hair out of his face aren't even. I learned that he might not be the most physically attractive of the aliens on paper, but to me? He's perfection. His big nose, long face and goofy smile? I love all of it, because it's him.

I set my cup down and struggle to get to my feet to greet him, but he's at my side before I can even manage to get halfway out of my seat. He takes my hands in his and helps me haul my body upright. "You were gone a while."

He ignores my cranky tone and presses a kiss to my cheek. "My chief had much to say to me."

I glance back at the cave to see if Georgie or Vektal are heading this way. When they don't appear, I turn back to Cashol. "What were they nagging you about?"

He tsks at my choice of words and brushes a lock of hair from my cheek. "We will discuss it later. Do you want to bathe? The water will be good for your back."

I narrow my eyes at him because I recognize a subject change. He's trying to distract me, or he doesn't want to discuss it in front of the others. I rub my lower back again. "I guess so."

"Come," he says, gently steering me toward the pool in the center of the cavern. "I have fresh soap-berries and your favorite comb."

And because having my mate wash my hair is one of my favorite things in the world, I don't put up a fuss even though I can't quite shake the feeling that something bad's about to happen. Cashol is attentive as ever as he helps me pull my layers of clothing off, and his arms are strong as he helps me into the water. He strips down and climbs in next to me and then pulls me against him. He sits on one of the little ledges under the surface of the water and I rest my arms on his thighs as his fingers undo my coronet of braids.

I relax against him, my eyes sliding closed. The warmth of the hot spring does feel amazing on my lower back, and the heavy pull of the baby's weight on my front is non-existent in the water. I'm so ready to give birth, but I've still got a few more weeks at the very least. My baby hasn't dropped, and Maylak - the tribe's healer - seems to think I'll carry right up until the last moment. Which sucks. Nine months is a long time to be pregnant, and that's a normal human pregnancy. Because I've been knocked up by an alien? I have a full fifteen months of pregnancy (give or take some wiggle room) which feels like forever. Though I suppose it could be worse - Maylak's been pregnant since we landed here almost two years ago and she's still got about a year to go.

Cashol finishes undoing my braids and gives my arm a little tap. That's my signal to dunk my head, and I do so, holding onto his leg. When I resurface, I settle back in against him and the sweet scent of the soapberries fills my nose as he crushes them into a paste and then begins to work it into my hair. I'm relaxed and feeling wonderful as I lean against him.

The sound of a crying baby makes me open my eyes and I glance over. Josie's awkwardly handing Elsa back to Nora, and as I watch, Josie's mate Haeden approaches and gives Josie an affectionate nuzzle. It's strange to see, considering that Haeden's a rather standoffish, surly sort, but Josie melts against him and I'm happy for her.

Seeing Haeden reminds me of his comments, though, and I touch Cashol's knee. "So what did Vektal talk to you about?"

His long fingers massage my scalp. "We can talk about it later, my lovely mate. It is not important."

Uh huh. If it wasn't important, he'd have already told me about it. I turn in the water and narrow my eyes at him. "You might as well tell me now, while the cavern isn't full of people, so I can pitch my fit in front of as few as possible."

He gives me one of those heartbreakingly gorgeous crooked smiles and then glances around the cavern. It's just Nora and her babies, and Josie and her mate, and anytime you get Josie and Haeden together lately, they tend to forget about everyone else. I see them heading off, possibly to go back to their own cave and uh, 'reconnect'. People do that a lot in the first flush of resonance. I know from experience.

Cashol brushes his fingertips over my forehead, wiping away sudsy juice. His smile fades a little. "Vektal is just worried."

A knot forms in the pit of my stomach. "About?"

"The brutal season." His fingers trace over my skin, less about cleaning up and more about just touching me. "Our storage caches are nearly empty. We must all work hard to replenish them so no one goes hungry over the cold months when it is difficult to leave the caves." He skims my cheek. "There are many more mouths to feed this time."

"Vektal wants you to go out on the hunt, doesn't he?" My voice is flat. Just the idea of Cashol leaving my side for days on end - even weeks - fills me with terror. The other hunters leave for days at a time regularly, and it's just a thing. It's a necessary evil, and when they return, their mates are always thrilled to greet them again. They reunite for a few days, hunt near the caves to be with their families for a bit, and then inevitably go back out on the trails, because everyone depends on them for food. It's a fact of life on the ice planet.

Except...for my mate.

Ever since we resonated to each other, Cashol hasn't gone out. There's nothing wrong with him. He's not injured, not sick, not weak. He hunts small game near the caves and keeps me company. I've even gone out hunting with him, back before my belly grew to a monstrous size.

I accept that I'm clingy and just slightly a bit too needy to be normal. I don't care, either. With my mate at my side? I'm happy. Let

Haeden say what he wants.

But Cashol's small nod sends an icy dagger right through my gut. I wrap my arms around his calf, clinging to him. "I don't want you to go."

Again, he smiles. "I am not leaving just yet. There is time still. But I will have to go out, soon. As I have said, there are many that depend on us and there are more mouths to feed."

Those are Vektal's words, and I don't care how practical they are. I bite my lip. "I don't want you to go," I say again, panic surging through me. "I'm so close to having the baby."

Cashol's eyes widen and he pulls me up into his lap in the water, his hand roaming my enormous belly. "Is my son arriving? Has he dropped?" It's a word he's picked up from pregnancy-speak among all the pregnant humans.

The excitement on his face just makes me more depressed. "No, he's still in the same spot he ever was." I rest my hand over Cashol's big, three-fingered one. "Still a few weeks to go I'm afraid."

He rubs my belly and then presses a kiss to my nose. "Then I must go out and do my share."

"I don't want you to leave!"

"I will be back in time for Megol to smile his way into the world," he says with a mischievous grin on his face.

I groan. I love this man, but he is terrible with names. "We are not naming the baby Megol. I told you. It makes me think of Gollum."

"It is a fine name," he chides me, but there's amusement in his voice. "Very strong and brave."

I just snort-giggle. "Not gonna happen."

"Then, Holmeg it is. We have decided. It is most pleasing for a son's name."

Even though I've heard this joke a hundred times over the last twelve or fourteen months or so, it's never not funny. I'm giggling and shaking my head. "Absolutely not. Our baby is going to have a nice name. And it might be a girl."

"It is a boy," he insists. "Strong with a mighty spear like his father." And he wiggles his hard, ridged brow at me in another human gesture he's picked up, and I know he's not talking about spear-weapons. Which only makes me laugh harder.

By the time I dunk my head to rinse it, I'm not even upset anymore. That's why Cashol's so good for me - he makes me forget all the terrible things in life for a while.

CASHOL

My Meh-gan is not happy. It tears at me, even as I do my best to make her smile. There is worry behind her eyes, and I want nothing more than to take it from her.

Instead, I distract her. I tease her about names for our kit. I hold the bone rings that she uses for weaving her leather strips and talk endlessly while she works. I bribe some of the sweet root cakes from Pashov's Stay-cee and bring them to my Meh-gan to see her smile. She does for me, but it quickly fades.

She worries. I know she does. She has told me about her past before - that she had a pleasure-mate - a boy-friend as she calls it - who abandoned her. Then she was pregnant with a kit when taken by the strange creatures that brought her here. They took it from her.

She worries that if she loves too deeply, it will be taken from her again.

I understand this; I lost my father in the khui-sickness many years ago. I know the burden of grief, and so even though hearing of the pleasure-mate and kit that she lost fills me with an unhappy jealousy, I understand how they affect her.

Mostly, I just want her to smile again.

Meh-gan works busily all day on her leather-strap rugs she makes. The other females like them as well, and so she is working on several at once. We eat stew that Leezh has made, because

Meh-gan is tired easily and I did not leave the cave to hunt for dinner. Not today. I will be leaving soon enough. Today will be a day to dote on my mate and discuss her fears.

When she picks up another one of the half-finished leather rugs and begins to work on it, I pry it out of her hands. "You are tired. Come lie down in the furs."

Meh-gan rubs her face. "I promised Claire I'd make her a rug, too, and—"

"Tomorrow," I tell her, and pull it out of her grasp when she reaches for it again. "There is always another day to work."

She nods slowly and then sniffs. Her hand swipes at her pale cheek, and her lip trembles.

My heart feels as if it is crumbling inside my chest. "My resonance," I murmur, pulling her small form into my arms and tucking her against me. "It is just a rug."

Her tears turn to a muffled giggle and she swats at my arm. "You know why I'm crying, you big goof."

I smooth the tears from her face and do my best to make her smile again. "Goof - that is an excellent name for our kit. Very majestic."

"Oh my God," she says, and shakes her head against my chest. "Do not even get me started, you crazy alien." Meh-gan sniffs. "And I'm crying because you're going to leave me behind."

"I must do this," I say gently. "You and our little Goof must be fed when the snows become brutal." The weather is pleasant now, but already Vektal and the hunters worry. I share in their worries, eating less when meals are passed around. Meh-gan gets the biggest portion, and I eat the scraps. There is no getting around it: the tribe must be fed, and as a strong male, I must do my part.

She nods, but the sad look on her face doesn't ease.

I touch her chin and angle her small, strange human face up so she can look me in the eye. "My resonance, you know I would stay at your side and rub your feet all day long if you wished it. But I would rather that you had food to eat when the weather turns. And it will turn. Already this season is colder than last. The snows will be deeper this time, and so we must be ready."

“I know I’m being ridiculous. I just...when you’re here by my side, my world is complete. If you leave, I’m going to feel lost and alone. I hate that feeling.” She touches her stomach. “And what if the baby - the kit - comes early?”

I get down on my knees and place my hands on her stomach. “Goof, my son, you must stay put until I return.”

She chuckles and then gives another small sniff. “I know you have to go.”

“I do.”

“When? For how long?” Her hands smooth over her belly again and it’s clear she’s worried she’ll have our kit while I’m gone. I voiced the same concerns to Vektal. Meh-gan is close to giving birth. Not quite yet, but very soon. I want to be here to welcome my son to the world.

But I sound confident. “Not long. A handful of days, maybe two handfuls. The longer I am out, the more meat I can bring home.” I cannot expect others to feed my family, not when it might be taking food from the mouths of their mates. “It is something that must be done.”

She blinks rapidly, trying to be brave. “I just...what am I going to do while you’re gone?”

I kiss the rounded swell of her belly. “You will think of me, of course.”

She gives a delicate snort.

I know I am right, for all that I tease her. My Meh-gan gets sad if she is left to her own thoughts for too long. And right now, she is very heavy with child, miserable, and she will be missing me. I cannot stand the thought of her being sad for days on end.

I will have to think of something to distract her while I am gone. But for now...

I press another kiss to her belly. “You are beautiful, my resonance.”

Megan sighs, the sound soft and feminine. Her fingers lightly brush over my cheek and nose, tracing my face. “I’m bloated and pregnant.”

“You are beautiful and beautiful,” I correct. I press another kiss to her belly, and because she’s covered in furs and leathers, I undo the

laces that go all the way down the front of her tunic. I want to taste her skin, to breathe in her scent. I want to bury my face in her cunt and lick her until she cries out with my name.

“What are you doing?” she asks, even as her hands gently brush my hair back from my face.

“I am going to show my mate how beautiful she is with my mouth and my cock.” I push her tunic open, revealing her belly, big with my son.

“You mean you’re going to distract me,” she teases. Her thumb skims over my lower lip.

“Yes.” I grin up at her. “Tell me you do not want to be distracted and I will stop.”

“I didn’t say that.” The smile returns to her sweet face and she shrugs out of her tunic. “Put the privacy screen up.”

I jump to my feet and head to the front of our small cave, shoving the screen in front of the entrance. With it up, no one will disturb us. For a moment, I am tempted to leave the screen up for a hand’s worth of days, just to wallow in private time with my mate. She does not want me to leave, and I do not want to leave her. But I must hunt, not only for her safety but for that of the tribe. It is my duty. I push the screen into place and then turn to see my mate stepping out of her long skirt. Her body is nude except for a furry pair of boots, and she is beautiful. Her pale breasts are swollen in preparation for our kit, her belly rounded. The rest of her has grown more rounded as well, and I cannot resist touching her. I love the lush swells of her body and the way she feels when I hold her against me. It reminds me that my mate was thin and underfed when she arrived here. I must do everything I can to ensure she is never hollow-cheeked again.

I pull Meh-gan against me and kiss her bared skin. Her shoulder is soft, her neck a warm, lovely hollow of scent. She is quiet as I touch her, even though she leans in to my hands. I know my mate well; her mind is full of noise and unhappy thoughts. I need to think of a way to distract her while I am gone, so she is not so sad and lost. But for now, I can kiss away her tears. I kneel at her side and kiss her rounded belly again, then move to her side, brushing my lips over her hip. My hand skims over her full buttocks, so strangely bare

without a tail. I find it erotic, though, and cannot resist gliding my fingers down the seam of her bottom.

She moans and braces her hands against the cave wall. Because her belly is so heavy, we mate in the same positions over and over again - and her favorite is to brace her hands against the wall and lean forward. I like this as well, as it lets me pleasure my mate easily while on my knees. My tail flicks and wraps around one of her ankles as I push her legs even further apart, and then bury my face in her flesh, seeking her warmth.

Her soft cry touches my ears the moment my tongue slicks over the opening of her cunt. I thrust into her warmth, loving the taste of her. I will miss this when I am gone, miss her soft body, her scent, her smiles, her everything. She shifts and pushes her hips back against my mouth, a silent demand for more. I give it to her eagerly, working my tongue into her over and over again, thrusting with it as I will my cock.

She moans and her fingers go to the third nipple between her folds, teasing it. I am greedy - I want all of her for myself. So I push her hand aside and work her nipple for her, and I feel her body quiver in response. Her breathing turns to short, sharp pants, and she pushes her hips back against my mouth, needing more. Her wetness floods my tongue, and I groan. My cock aches with fierce need for her.

I lick her for a moment longer, until she starts to tremble. Then, I surge to my feet and push my loincloth down, freeing my cock and spur. I put a hand to her hips and guide myself deep, seating into her warmth. She cries out as I push into her, wriggling. My spur presses into the pucker of her bottom, and I clench one of her buttocks as I force myself to hold still. Meh-gan always wiggles when I thrust into her for the first time, and I wait for my mate's body to calm before thrusting again. I take her body in slow, easy strokes, careful to watch her to make sure that her noises are ones of pleasure, not discomfort. When she takes too long to moan again, I push deep, ignoring her little squeal as my spur seats itself again, and I reach in front of her to tease her third nipple.

Meh-gan comes with a full-body shudder, pressing back against me. Her cunt clenches hard around my cock, and I bite down on her

shoulder as I thrust into her with quick, shallow strokes. A moment later, my sac tightens and then my release floods through me, the pleasure so intense my tail tightens hard around her ankle, as if I could trap her with me forever.

She clings to me, running her hands over my body as best she can, and I nuzzle her throat and bitten shoulder as I pull myself free. Mating with her so pregnant is no longer endless caresses and exploring of bodies. Rather, it is scratching an itch and reveling in the feel of the other. When our kit is born, I will pleasure her for hours on end once more. For now, I am pleased when she comes fast and hard. I get a soft leather cloth from a basket, wet it down with a bit of water, and then return to my mate's side to clean her thighs.

"I forgot to take my boots off," she murmurs sleepily as I bathe her. "Sorry about that."

"You are beautiful in your boots or without them. I do not care which way." I cannot resist pressing another kiss to her protruding belly.

The small smile on her face fades and a sad look appears. "I'm sorry if I'm making this hard on you. I know you have to go hunt. I know we need food. I'm just..." she licks her lips. "Afraid."

My poor, sweet mate. She clings so hard because she is afraid of being lost and alone again. "You must trust me, Meh-gan. I will always come back to you."

"I know," she whispers. "But knowing it and believing it are two different things."

Truth. As I finish bathing her body and mine, we climb into the furs of our bed and she rests her cheek on my chest, over my khui. It thrums with contentment, and I stroke her back.

I must think of something to occupy my mate while I am gone so she does not worry. But...what?

Perhaps one of the other humans will have an idea.

MEGAN

I can do this. I can.

I blink repeatedly as Cashol shoulders his pack, then picks up his spear. He runs his thumb over the edge of the spearhead, testing the sharpness. I know it's razor-sharp - he's worked on it and three replacement spearheads for the last two days, along with sharpening his knives. Between those, his sling, and the full pack I've insisted he carry, he's kitted out.

And yet I'm still freaking out. I'm still worried as he takes my hand and leads me to the front of the tribal cave so we can say our goodbyes. Josie and Haeden are there, too, holding hands. Haeden and Cashol are going to head out in the same direction and split up a bit further up the trails. I don't like that Cashol's going to be alone, even though he swears this is quite normal. I know it's normal. Doesn't mean I'm not panicking.

I'm the only one freaking, it seems. Josie is totally in panic mode. She's fussing with the ties on Haeden's vest and yakking his ear off while he silently devours her with his eyes.

"It's snowing," I protest as we get near the entrance. Terror clutches at my heart.

"My resonance, have you just now realized that it snows here?" He leans in and bends down to rub his nose against mine. "You will be very disappointed to learn that it snows every day, my heart."

I bat at him playfully. Silly man. “You’ve got mittens?”

“I do not need them.” He winks at me. “If my fingers are cold, I will put them around my cock and—“

“Shhh!” I reach up and clap a hand over his mouth. “Cashol! You are terrible!”

He licks my palm and I squeal and pull it from his mouth. He *is* terrible, but I can’t stop smiling.

“I need no mittens,” he tells me and presses a kiss to my forehead. “The weather is warm enough for sa-khui.”

I look out into the heavily falling snow and sigh. He’s not wrong, but I still don’t like it. “And you have my firestarter?” I touch my neck, now bare. Normally the humans all wear one of the computer parts brought back from the Elders’ Ship, because they’re made of some sort of graphite or metal or something that sparks easily to make fire. I don’t plan on leaving the cave, however, so I’ve given mine to him.

He reaches under his cloak and shows me the necklace. “It is here.”

I nod slowly. I can’t think of any other things to ask him. “You’ve got food? And drink? And—“

Cashol cups my face with his free hand. “I will be fine. Now, come, devour my face like Jo-see is devouring Haeden’s.”

I look over and Josie has her arms flung around Haeden’s much bigger form. She even has a leg hooked around his hips and he’s got her lifted into the air as they suck face. It’s...pretty impressive. I’m envious because she’s still small and lithe and I’m...well, ‘lumbering’ is probably the kindest word. I pat my huge belly. “You’re going to have to settle for a more sedate hug and kiss, I’m afraid. I’ve got a bit of a roadblock.”

Cashol grins and gives me a smacking kiss, then leans down and gives the same to my belly. “You must be good, Gancas, my son. Do not come before I return home.”

“That is a terrible name,” I point out. Jesus, he’s awful at naming, but it makes me smile to hear it. Better than ‘Goof’. “And it might be a girl, remember?”

“It is not,” he says, smoothing a hand over my belly in the hopes of catching the baby kicking one last time. “Rokan says it is a boy and Rokan is never wrong about these things.”

I make a face. It feels like a girl to me, but...Rokan does have a pretty uncanny ability to predict small things. "Speaking of Rokan, what's he say about the weather?"

Cashol hops to his feet again and gives me another kiss. "He says you should kiss your mate and send him on his way."

That's...not a good answer. "Cashol? What's Rokan say about the weather?" I'd go find Rokan myself but he left the cave on a journey with one of the new girls yesterday.

"He says it will snow." Cashol shrugs. "It does not matter if it is little snow or much snow, I still must hunt."

I swallow hard. This isn't helping my anxiety much. "How long will you be gone?"

"Until the caches on my trail are full. It might be two hands of days, or it might be less."

"Your hands or mine?" I ask, wiggling my four fingers at him. He's only got three and a thumb.

He grins. "Does it matter?"

"It matters to me!"

He sets his spear aside and puts his hands on my shoulders. "Meh-gan," he says, voice so gentle that it makes my insides ache. "I will be back when I have done my job as a hunter. It does not mean I will not miss you. It does not mean I will not think of you and your sweet smile every waking moment. It means I will be providing for you and our son. And I will be back in time to see him born, I promise."

The hot tears that I've been fighting to hold back come pouring out in a rush of snot and sobbing. "Okay," I blubber at him. "I love you, Cashol."

"I love you, my resonance." He kisses me on the mouth, even though I'm probably not very cute at the moment. "And I will be back."

I nod and do my best not to cling to him as he pulls away from me. I wave goodbye as he picks up his spear again and heads out, joined by Haeden. It takes everything I have not to run after him, screaming for him to take me with him, but that wouldn't be dignified or practical.

Still, it does my evil, awful heart good to see Josie sniffing beside me. At least I'm not suffering alone. I put an arm around her waist and give her an awkward hug. "Come on, let's go have some *kah-hraku*-tea and drown our sorrows."

Her little sob is punctuated by a disgusted laugh.



IT ISN'T until I lie down for a nap that I realize there's a lump in the bed, under the covers. It digs into my back and I pull it out awkwardly.

It's a...well, I'm not entirely sure what it is. The sa-khui use bone for the majority of their daily utility needs, since there's not a Pottery Barn anywhere nearby. This rounded disk could be a plate or the makings of something else entirely, if it weren't for the weird decorations on it. There's a hole bored through the center with a leather cord tied through it, and it's colored with a very messy looking squiggle. It's...almost like a K? Or a M. Which makes me wonder.

I sit up and study it. I've never seen it before, but it's in my bed so it was clearly meant for me. Is it sloppy handwriting? Something else?

Confused, I haul my ungainly body back out of bed, wrap a warm fur around me, and pad into the main cavern again.

Georgie's there with her baby in her lap, and Farli's seated next to her. They're whispering and both look up with guilty expressions when I approach.

Yeah, bingo. They're up to something. I hold up the weird disk thingie. "What the heck is this and why was it in my bed?"

"Your bed?" Georgie bounces Talie on her knee, her brows drawing together. "What do you mean?"

"Did you guys go in my cave?"

Farli shakes her head, and then covers her mouth to hide her giggle.

"But you know what this is?"

They exchange a look and Georgie begins to smile. "I might have an idea."

I'm starting to get cranky. I'm tired, and sore, and my mate is gone and I don't feel like playing games. "So what is it, already?"

"That, I honestly don't know," Georgie says, reaching for the disk. I hand it to her and she studies it. "Oh dear." Her lips twitch. "This is pretty bad."

"What's going on?" I'm utterly mystified.

"So, after Vektal and Cashol talked the other day, Cashol came and spoke to me. He was worried about leaving your side."

Farli gets up and offers me her seat, and I take it with a heavy thump, fascinated by what Georgie's telling me. "Because of the baby?"

She shakes her head and hands the bone disc-thingie back to me. "Because of you," she says gently. "He worries you'll struggle if he's gone."

Tears prick at my eyelids. "He's not wrong. He's only been gone a few hours and...it's hard." I feel an empty gulf where my laughing, funny mate normally is, and it hurts.

"I know. It's always hard, but it's necessary." There's no judgment on her face. "So he asked me what he could do to keep your mind off of him. Something to keep you distracted. I suggested a treasure hunt."

"You did?" I knew I'd been taking a fair amount of naps recently but for Cashol and Georgie to come up with a treasure hunt on the down-low and me not realize it? That's kind of crazy.

"Well, actually I suggested a lot of different things. The only idea he actually liked was the treasure hunt."

I hold up the disc. "So this is part of that?"

She shrugs. "I honestly don't know. I told him the concept - that there are clues and arrows left to point to the treasure - and didn't hear anything else about it."

Oh, my goodness. Is this a clue? Is the painted, sad looking squiggle supposed to be an arrow? I study the object again. Instead of seeing a crudely made object with drunken lettering, I see it for what it really is - an item lovingly made by my mate, probably while I was asleep. He made it without a lot of time to work on it, and the squiggle that should be an arrow probably looks like that because

the sa-khui have no need for arrows or symbols except as decoration.

I sniff. Hard. And then I start to cry. “This is the sweetest thing ever.”

“I know,” Georgie says. She waves a finger in front of Talie’s face and smiles when the baby reaches for it. “He’s thoughtful, that man of yours.”

“He’s the best.” I mean it, too. I’m already thinking of ways I can show him that I appreciate his thoughtfulness. I’m going to have to have his favorite meal ready for when he comes home, and blend some of his favorite tea-leaves. Maybe I’ll make a new pouch for his spearheads. His favorite hood is worn through, and I can make him a new one, and...oh, there are so many things. It suddenly feels like not enough time to do everything.

“Well?” Georgie asks when I’m lost in thought.

“Well...what?” The baby kicks hard and I put a hand to my belly, momentarily confused.

She laughs. “What about the treasure hunt?”

“Oh!” I gaze down at the disc I’m clutching tight in my hand. It kind of feels like the prize all on its own. But Cashol’s put so much thought into making me happy, and I want to see what he’s done. I’ll probably weep like a crazy person over each new thing, but that’s all right, too.

It’s funny - knowing that he set this up makes me feel less alone. Like he’s here at my side even when he’s not. I feel a smile tugging at my mouth, and it feels like the first genuine one I’ve had all day. I picture Cashol bent over this ugly disc, working hard on it and anticipating setting me off on this little mini-adventure while he’s out on a real one.

“I guess I’d better start looking.” I hold up the disc-on-a-thong. “Any ideas on what this is supposed to lead me to?”

“Girl, no clue at all.”

I eye Farli, who’s sitting nearby quietly. “Do I need to search your paint pots?”

She giggles. “He borrowed them but already gave them all back.” She shakes her head. “No necklaces.”

“Oh, is this a necklace?” I study it again. Bless my mate’s heart, but it’s kind of hideous. “I thought it was like, a teacup saucer or something.”

Georgie gives me a strange look. “With a hole in the center?”

“What else could it be?”

“That’s the question of the day.” I study it again as Josie comes and thumps down next to us, a dejected look on her face. “It reminds me of donuts, actually.”

“Reminds me of a pizza cutter,” Josie chimes in, her chin resting on her hands. “Why do you have a pizza cutter?”

A pizza cutter? I touch the edge and it’s blunted, but it could easily be made sharp. Interesting. “My mate left me a treasure hunt,” I tell her. And because she looks so darn sad, I ask, “Want to help me look for the next clue?”

“Sure.”



THE SA-KHUI are a people that don’t like to waste anything. Horns, hooves, furs, dried bladders, you name it - all of a kill can be put to use. And because even the bones are used, there’s a lot of storage. In fact, there’s an entire cave dedicated to storing items, and that’s where Josie and I find ourselves - sifting through basket after basket of cleaned, stored bones, just waiting to be carved into something useful. It’s kind of macabre, but after two years of living with the sa-khui? I’ve gotten over a lot of my squeamishness.

I’m picking through a handful of what look like dvisti ribs when Josie sighs. “What is it?” I ask.

“I miss Haeden,” she says, flinging aside a vertebrae into another basket. “It seems like he just got back and now he’s gone again.”

She’s not wrong - Haeden was gone for weeks on a trek to recover the new human women, and I feel a pang of guilt. Cashol’s been at my side the entire time. I...guess it’s been selfish of me to demand that he stay here when everyone else has to sacrifice. “You could go with him,” I suggest. “Liz goes hunting with Raahosh.”

“I suggested it.” Josie’s glum tone tells me how that conversation went. “He wants me to stay safe with the baby on the way.”

“Mmm. Well, it’s not the worst idea. Not that I think you’ll hurt yourself.” I run my hand over a long, smooth rib, debating taking it back to the cave with me. I need a new ladle and with a bit of carving, this could work well. “But give it a few months and you’ll run out of energy and you’ll be glad you’re here with the rest of us. Besides, he can probably get more done without distractions.”

“He is easily distracted,” she says dreamily.

This is getting close to TMI territory so I renew my digging into a fresh basket. I’m wearing my ugly little disc around my neck now, so I don’t lose it, and I’m growing fonder of it by the moment. I touch it often, just so I can remind myself that Cashol’s thinking of me. It helps.

“So how come Cashol finally decided to go out on a longer hunt? I thought you guys had some sort of agreement with Vektal or something.”

Did she not know that Haeden said something? Or maybe it was just a rumor. Either way, it doesn’t matter. “It was time. He needed to go out. The hunting’s gonna be hot and heavy until the winter gets here. Sorry, not winter. Brutal season. Whatever.”

“That’s what everyone keeps saying.” She pulls her basket closer and tucks it between her legs, then digs deep. “But you hate that he’s gone out, don’t you? I can tell.”

“It’s...hard.”

“Why?”

Josie’s innocent question doesn’t surprise me. She loves to talk. In fact, that’s one reason why I like her company so much - she’ll talk endlessly if given a subject, and it’s good to hear someone else fill the empty space. If it gets too quiet, I’ll start to miss Cashol even more. “For the same reason that Haeden makes you stay near the cave instead of going hunting with him, I suppose.” My basket’s turning out to be a big dud, so I brush my hands off and put it aside. “I worry.”

“That he’s going to get hurt? Haeden says Cashol’s good at hunting. A good tracker. Doesn’t have the sixth sense like Rokan does, but he can read a trail really well. But I kind of think Haeden’s one of the best hunters, so I might be biased. It’s easy to be biased when you’re mated to such a great guy.”

My lips twitch as Josie gives another dreamy sigh. Hard to believe she was cussing Haeden's name a few short months ago. Resonance changes everything, though. Before, Cashol was just kind of...there. In the scenery. A nice guy in a sea of nice guys that wanted a mate. He'd never put the moves on me, never hit on me, but if I needed a hand with something, he was always one of the first to volunteer. That's just how he is. He's friendly and generous and so clever.

Great, now I'm missing him. I ignore the lonely pang that shoots through me and hoist another basket as near my protruding belly as I can. The baby's unusually active today, constantly thumping and moving around. I give my belly a little pat and then reach into the basket. "I just worry, you know? I worry that...well, it's like how we got here. Everything was fine and normal, and then I woke up and my world changed. Kidnapped by aliens and everything that was familiar torn away from me." I swallow hard. "I...guess I'm worried about that happening again. About getting too comfortable, too happy, and then everything goes to hell once more."

Because now? I'm happier than I've ever been. I've got the most wonderful mate, and a baby on the way, and most days I'm so happy I don't even mind that there's no chocolate or toilet paper or shampoo on the ice planet. I can do without those as long as I have Cashol and my baby.

If I lose them...

I shake my head to clear the dark thoughts. "Any luck on matching discs?"

"Nada, amigo."

"Keep looking. There's a few more baskets over in the corner."

"I'm on it," she says, and gets to her feet. "As for the worry? It's funny, but I don't worry anymore."

I pick through my basket idly. "No?"

"Nope. I figure that I've been kidnapped by aliens and dropped halfway across the galaxy to find the one person that's perfect for me, so there's got to be a master plan at work." She begins to hum a little tune and then pauses. "We've got to trust that the worst is over, you know? All the storm clouds are behind us and there's nothing but blue skies ahead."

I smile to hear her say that. Maybe she's right. Maybe there are nothing but good things from this point on. Except...I don't point out that the skies here are rarely blue and are most often covered with a gray, wintry fog.

Let her have enough optimism for the both of us.

CASHOL

The dvisti herd peacefully grazing in the valley is completely unaware of my presence. I'm downwind of them and Haeden's nearby, up on a ledge. He has the onerous task this day of rubbing his skin with dung to disguise his smell, and they have yet to notice him. It will be my turn for the next herd.

We had originally planned to go our separate ways to hunt but Haeden does not want to be away from his new mate. I do not wish to be away from Meh-gan's side as well, and so we devise a plan to attack a herd and bring back much dvisti meat without spending handfuls of days away.

So we have spent several days digging pits. Many, many pits. Long pits. Deep pits with spear-heads attached to stakes. It snows endlessly, and we spend half the day re-digging out our trenches. The weather is bad and only growing worse, and if this does not work, we will be spending even more days afield.

It is a risk, but we are willing to try it.

The call of a scythe-beak cuts through the air and I look over at Haeden. He makes the strange, cutting sound again, a hand to his mouth. I nod and respond with the same. It is time.

The dvisti graze on, unaware of our presence.

Then, Haeden gives a blood-curdling yell, jumping down from his perch. He waves his spear, screaming as he rushes toward the

startled herd. They panic and surge in the opposite direction, toward me.

I jump as well, bellowing, and chase after them as they switch directions once more. Now the herd has nowhere to go but towards our pit traps. They charge toward the pits, invisible against the snowy drifts, and one bellows as it goes down into the hole. Another sinks after it, and there is a snap of bone. Three more dvisti bray and skirt wide, but several more of the herd end up in the traps, and Haeden and I jog toward them, pleased.

“How many did we get?” I ask as we meet up, spears in hand. The day’s work is just beginning - we will need to kill any trapped dvisti that did not snap their necks. We will need to pull the carcass from the pit, cut the throat to bleed it, and then dress it. Our sleds wait against a nearby cliff, and from there, we will ferry our kills to a cache.

Then, we will clean ourselves off and do it all over again.

Haeden grunts, staring ahead. “Six, maybe seven. Not enough.”

“There is more time,” I tell him. “And more herds.” I am pleased, though. This is a good deal of meat, and the tribe needs more.

“And more pits to be dug,” he says, and then reaches over and smears his dung-covered arm against mine. “You get to be upwind next time.”

I jog away from him, chuckling. “That is fine. My Meh-gan is not here to smell my stink. I can be as filthy as I want for the next handful of days.”

Haeden is silent. That is not unusual, though, and we both set to work. After a short time, the dvisti are slain and dragged out of the pit, and we begin to dress the seven carcasses. One is puny and will not provide much food, but the others are fat and healthy. I think of my Meh-gan. Has she found the little presents I have been busy hiding for her? Humans place great emphasis on gifts, and so I have tried to think about what would please her—

“What is it like?”

Eh? I look up from the dvisti belly that I am currently arm-deep in, removing the offal. “What is what like?”

Haeden doesn’t look at me. He is equally busy, but I wonder if it is something more. “Your mate,” he says after a long moment. “The

kit. Have things changed now that her belly grows?”

Ah. He is curious. Newly mated, I have no doubt that he worries things with Jo-see will adjust and he will not like the results. “We do not mate as often,” I tell him.

“No?” He looks up, brows drawn together.

“Only three times a day,” I say solemnly. “Maybe twice if my cock is tired.”

Something splats on my arm. It’s intestine. Filled. Disgusting. I look up and Haeden’s snarling at me.

I burst into laughter. “You are too serious, my friend.”

“And you joke too much.” He gives me another disgusted look and returns to butchering his kill. “I just...things are good right now. I do not wish for that to change.”

“It changes,” I tell him carefully, this time being truthful.

“Everything always changes. It is unavoidable. Some of the intensity of resonance gets lost, but it is replaced by new things. Better things.” I sit back, wiping my hands clean of blood as I take a brief pause. Thoughts of Meh-gan fill my mind and I smile to myself. “I love to hear my mate’s laugh. I love to take care of her. I do not mind when she is tired, because then I will pull her against me and hold her all night. I live to please her, and when you feel your son kick in her belly...” I spread my hands, helpless to describe the joy of it. “Everything in the world is perfect.”

His jaw clenches and he gives a jerky nod after a moment. “Jo-see wants many kits. I...I just want her. Is it wrong that I do not care about the kits?”

“You will,” I assure him. “When you feel it move in her belly, you will know joy.”

He grunts. “I already know joy.”

“More joy,” I amend. “You will not feel jealous of the kit, if that is your worry. There will be room in your mate’s heart for both. Know this.” I pick up my blade again and glance up at the sky. It grows darker by the moment, and I can feel the air growing chilled. “It is her belly we should worry about at the moment.”

Haeden looks up and nods. “We must work faster.”



WE HAVE THE LAST DRESSED, skinned carcass buried in the cache moments before the weather changes for the worse. One moment, it is snowing heavily. The next, the wind makes my hair icy, wet whips that flay at my skin and I can no longer see my hand in front of my face.

“To the cave,” Haeden bellows. I can barely hear him over the roar of the wind. I claw my hand into his backpack to keep hold of him - for his safety as well as my own - and head in the direction of the hunter cave. There is one not far, but it might be impossible to find in the storm.

The wind grows bitterly cold and I wrap my fur cape around my shoulders and neck. I picture Meh-gan back in the cave, her fragile human body pinkish-blue with chills. I am not there to bundle her in thicker furs, or to get her hot tea when she is cold and too distracted to take care of herself. I feel a pang of worry; someone will think of my mate and take care of her if the cold gets to be too much, surely. The fires must be kept warm and the humans protected, especially the sweet human that carries my son.

I am lost in thought and concern for my mate, blindly following Haeden forward through the knee-deep snow when the wind abruptly dies. I look up, pushing my thick furs away from my frozen mane to realize we are in the hunter cave. I have been so distracted that I did not realize.

Haeden shrugs my hand off and moves toward the back of the dark cave. “Start the fire. I will see what supplies we have.”

My fingers find the frozen thong at my neck. Meh-gan’s fire starter is there. I can make a fire without it, but I want to use it and be close to her. I pull Meh-gan’s necklace from my throat and find my firestarter kit in my pack. Within moments, I have a fire going and begin to feed it dried dung and fluff to coax it higher.

Haeden emerges from the recesses of the cave with a bone plate. He mutters something about the dark and scoops up a coal on the plate, blowing gently on it to make it flare hotter. Then he disappears back into the recess of the cave. I stoke the fire and then set up my tripod to melt some snow to drink. The wind is ripping through the cave, and I find the hide screen that can be used to block the worst of the snow. It’s coming off one side, the leather

worn, and I spend a few moments re-stringing it around the heavy bone framework before pushing it in place against the cave entrance. It settles in and then beats like a drum against the wind, flapping in place. I ignore the noise and return to the fire.

This storm will likely last until morning. After that, we will be able to go out and continue hunting, provided the clouds clear. I remember Rokan's warnings about the storms, and worry anew about my mate.

Haeden returns to the front of the cave a moment later, his coal gone. In its place, he has a bundle of supplies - cured hides, a bundle of dried wood, and a pouch of what is likely kah, the granular meat mix most hunters live off of when away from the cave. He dumps it all near the fire and gives me a sour look. "It seems we will be spending the night together."

I do not mind the company. It helps keep my mind off my mate. "Keep your cold feet on your side of the bed tonight."

He gives me a scathing look. "The only person I want crawling into my furs is Jo-see. Stay on your side of the cave."

I chuckle. He is far too easy to tease. "Let us hope your Jo-see and my Meh-gan are safe and warm back at the caves."

"If they are not, I will wring the neck of every hunter who was there and did not take care of them." He scowls at the fire. "And a few female necks, too."

I nod slowly. I know that the tribe will look after our mates. Of course they will. Females are cherished and protected, and mine is heavy with kit; Haeden's mate is newly resonated. They will be pampered. My head knows this but my heart still worries.

Haeden pulls his bone knife out and uses it to stir the coals. "I am responsible for this."

"For the fire?"

He narrows his eyes at me. "For you being here instead of at Meh-gan's side. I said something to Vektal. I should have remained silent." He sits back on his haunches, staring down at the flame. "I just worry there will not be enough to feed everyone when the brutal season is upon us. If it is already this cold..."

He lets his words trail off, and my imagination takes away the rest. I picture snow piled high, the tribal cave mouth nearly buried

under the snow itself. The weather will be bitterly cold, and the humans do not handle the chill as well as the sa-khui. They will need warm wraps and fire. My Meh-gan will need extra food so she can produce milk for our son.

My son. He will be arriving very soon. "You were wise to say something," I tell Haeden. "I bear no grudge. Hunting is part of our life. My Meh-gan must come to understand that I cannot hover at her side for the rest of my days..." My mouth twists into a reluctant smile. "And I must realize I cannot hover at hers."

Haeden makes a sound of agreement. He pokes at the fire again, then sits back, his tail flicking a little easier. "Your kit will be born soon."

"Within the next moon," I agree.

"Rokan says this storm can last for handfuls of days."

I nod. Rokan warned me of the same before we left. "Meat must be hunted, though. There is no choice."

"There is not," Haeden says flatly. His gaze focuses on me. "What will you do if you miss your son's birth?"

"I will not," I tell him, and my voice is firm with resolve.

"How are you sure?" He gestures at the flapping, pounding leather screen blocking the entrance. "That is not letting up anytime soon."

He is not wrong. I suspect it will storm for many days, and then we must emerge to fight through the weather and hunt even more. But it does not worry me; rather, I am filled with determination.

Let the mountains fling all their snow down upon us. Let the dvisti run to the far ends of the valleys. It does not matter.

I will hunt to feed my mate. And I will be home to see my son born into my arms. I know these things to be true.

"I am sure," I tell Haeden. "He will not be born before I return home."

He snorts. "One of Rokan's feelings?"

I shake my head. Simple certainty. "There are things I know to be true. I know it will snow. I know the two suns will rise in the sky and give way to the two moons. I know my Meh-gan loves me. And I know I will return home to bring my son into this world."

He rolls his eyes and pulls out a stone to sharpen his bone blade.
“Then you had best hope the hunting is excellent after the storm.”

MEGAN

It has snowed every damn day for the last three weeks. Not a light fall of snow. Not a cheery sprinkle. Not a slight duster. Nope. It has been balls-to-the-wall blizzard conditions since Cashol has left the cave.

I'm worried about him, of course. I'm only human. But it's been so busy around the cave that I haven't been consumed by my loneliness. My mate's first and foremost in my thoughts, but the gnawing ache of his absence is tolerable. I'm excited for him to come back, and I'm excited for the baby to be born. We're close now, I can feel it. My stomach has dropped noticeably in the last few days and I have to pee every five minutes. It's annoying but I'm also excited because that means the baby's on his way.

And it means that Cashol will be home soon.

For now, I'm content to sit near the fire, facing the entrance of the big cave so I can see when someone returns, and set up shop. My nesting instincts are kicking in which means I want to do a million projects to make our cave cozier, and I'm enlisting others to help.

"Whatcha doing?" Stacy asks. "It looks like you have an assembly line going."

I glance up from the macramé braid I'm working. The ring is on my toe - not that I can really see my toe — and I'm braiding leather

strips quickly. I've also got Josie, Claire, and Liz at my side all doing the same. "I'm making a hammock."

"What? Why?" She gives me a baffled look and sits down with us, adjusting her chest-papoose that she keeps baby Pacy in.

"Because I think Cashol would want one," I tell her, braiding away. There's so much to do and so little time to do it in.

"She's nesting," Liz mock-whispers. "That baby's coming soon."

I shoot her a glare, my fingers never stopping in their endless braiding. "The baby is not coming yet. Cashol's not home."

"Whatever you say," Liz replies sweetly, then coughs. "Coughnestingcough."

Josie giggles and I hear Claire's stifled laugh. I ignore them, just like I've been ignoring the backache that's been nagging at me all day. The baby needs to wait its turn, and our son is not allowed to be born until his daddy comes home. So I'm choosing to overlook the fact that my back ache won't go away, or the fact that my belly has been hard and tight all day.

Cashol needs to be here for his son.

And I need to work faster on this hammock. I braid with renewed vigor, shooting Claire an impatient look when she slacks off. They said they wanted to help, not sit around.

Stacy maneuvers her chest papoose, wincing. "Horn in boob, sorry." She tucks Pacy against her again, settling him in. "That's better. So you're not scavenger hunting today?" She looks disappointed.

"Not today," I tell her. "Busy."

"What was yesterday's gift?" she asks, oblivious to my need to work.

"A pouch of cooked hraku seeds," Claire chimes in. "It's so sweet of him to do this for her."

"All the more reason to get the hammock done for him," I point out, weaving my leather cords steadily.

Everyone in the cave has been following along with my treasure hunt. After I found my disk, Josie and I found a pair of carved hair sticks at the bottom of one of the bone baskets in storage. They were wrapped in a hide decorated with squiggles and scattered with leaves, and it took me a day or two to realize the leaves were from

one of Tiffany's precious plants that have been struggling to grow in the increasing snow. Because of the storms, it took several days for the weather to clear long enough for me and Josie and Tiff to make it the two hundred feet outside of the cave and check on the plants. Buried near the roots of one was a lovely bone cup that had a pinkish sheen to it. Farli shyly confessed that she had made it, her brother Pashov had traded her for it, and Cashol had traded Pashov.

She'd also let it slip that there were six gifts total, so I'd taken my time discovering each one. I had the hair sticks, the strange disc thing on the necklace, the pretty cup, and after that was a new bone knife that had been made for my small hands. For some reason, I treasured the knife the most, because I remembered saying to Cashol over and over again that all of our knives were sized for his hands, not mine.

After that, it was a few days before I found the hraku seeds pouch, hidden by Harlow's stonecutter (which was now in disuse). The hide it had been wrapped in was decorated with what looked like drawings of animals. Either that meant I was going to find my next gift in food storage, or with Farli's pet Chompy, or some other thing that had to do with animals. And I'd look for it...tomorrow. Maybe. The thoughtfulness of the treasure hunt was half the pleasure, and I was in no hurry to have it end.

Besides, I want to get the hammock done. My belly cramps, and I rub it absently. I don't have much time to get this done and it's a big project. I braid faster, my fingers aching.

"Is this a Rokan thing?" Stacy teases. "Are you sensing that your man's going to be home soon?"

I shake my head. "Just wishful thinking. I don't know when he'll be back." I sure don't have the sixth sense that everyone jokes Rokan does. "But this needs to be done."

"Where are you going to possibly put a hammock?" Stacy asks.

"There's a nook in the corner of our cave with an outcropping that will work," I say. I've already explained this to everyone else in the cave, but hey, what's one more? "It'll be fine."

"What do you think the next present is?" Josie asks. "And did you ever find out what that disc-thing is?"

I begin to answer, and then my belly contracts, the ripple of muscles hard and surprising. I gasp and drop the leather strands I'm weaving together, putting a hand on my rounded stomach.

The cave gets quiet.

"Is it time?" Claire starts to get to her feet. "Should I get the healer?"

I put a hand on her arm to stop her. "I'm fine. Cashol's not home yet."

I ignore the uneasy look she casts at Josie and Liz. They think I'm crazy. I'm not, though. I'm just stubborn and I'm trusting in my mate. He said he'd be back in time for the birth. And since he's not here, it must not be time yet. *Any time now would be nice, though*, I think to myself as I pick up my leather strands again.

CASHOL

I sling my pack over my shoulder. "I am returning to the tribal cave."

Haeden gives me a troubled look as he feeds another dung chip to the fire. "Are you mad? The storms have not stopped. The snow will be so high it will be over your horns. It is not safe."

I nod slowly. "I know. But I feel in my gut that Meh-gan will have our son soon, and I must be there for her." It is a feeling that has been gnawing at me for the last day, and I cannot remain in this cave, idle.

We have been trapped here for longer than I want, and every day that passes feels like grit under my skin and chafes. Due to the weather, we are not feeding the tribe. We are just sitting and waiting.

I am tired of waiting. My Meh-gan is close to giving birth, and I will be there at her side no matter what.

"You are a fool," Haeden tells me sourly. "You will freeze solid, like a dvisti in a cache, and then we will have to bring your stiff body back to your mate."

I grin, because even as he tells me these terrible things, he picks up his own bag. "And yet you will come with me?"

He snorts. "The idea of freezing solid is more appealing than staying trapped here another hand of days with your smelly boots."

He pulls his heavy cloak off its hook and wraps it around his shoulders. "And I miss my mate, too."

I pick up my cloak as well; for the last few days we have been trapped, and with nothing to do, we have been preparing. My blades are lethally sharp, my sling supple in case I need it. We have taken the stored hides in the cave and stitched them into heavy cloaks to cover our lighter ones. We both made snowshoes because the snow is deep, but we have not been able to leave the safety of the small cave. The supplies in the hunter cave are down to nothing - the fuel is almost gone, the stored rations are completely exhausted, and we have taken all the furs. We will need to replenish it when the weather is better.

But for now? All I can think about is Meh-gan's smiling face. The need to see her burns in my gut. I cannot sleep at night because I worry over her. The days last endlessly because I want to be with her. I know Haeden suffers the same.

So even though it is dangerous, we will go.

We pull together the last of our supplies and wrap ourselves in heavy furs. The snowshoes go on over our boots. Outside, it is quiet, the wind muffled by the layer of snow burying our cave.

I put a hand on the leather screen and hesitate.

Haeden sighs.

"I know," I tell him. I stare out at the endless snow. Our cave was buried several days ago and we have kept a tunnel dug so we could have breathing air, but the landscape will be brutal, even for hunters such as us. The cold will be dangerous, the snow hiding many dangers. We are taking our lives into our hands by leaving.

But staying? With little food and no fire? Without our mates? It feels like no choice at all.

I look over at Haeden. "If the wind is high, we will not be able to speak." I wrap my furs tighter around my body. "Anything can happen. If I do not make it back, you will tell Meh-gan my last thoughts were of her?"

He glares at me. "You are a fool. I will tell her that."

I laugh, because my friend is the same no matter the danger. I pull the furs over my head to form a hood, push the screen aside, and step forward into the tunnel of snow. It is very dark. We push

forward, our steps slow as we emerge out of the dug tunnel and into the changed landscape. All around us there is snow. Endless snow. It drifts over everything, taller than I am, and only the pink, tufted tips of trees show above the powder. It is cold, desolate, and still. The sky remains thick with clouds, indicating that there will be more snow to come.

I take a step forward, and even with my snowshoe, I sink. I test the depth of the snow with my spear and it goes down all the way to the point. The air feels dry with the bone-searing cold and I can feel ice forming at my nostrils. I pull the furs tighter around my face and test my spear again in another spot. It sinks just as deep.

“Enough fooling around,” Haeden snarls, pushing ahead. “We need to go as far as we can before the weather starts again.”

He is right. I think of Meh-gan and her pale face anxiously watching the front of the cave for my return. The thought of her drives me forward, and I follow after Haeden.

Soon, my Meh-gan.

MEGAN

“Oh my God, you are such a bad liar,” Josie exclaims when I accidentally drop the leather cords I’m holding. “How long have you been in labor?”

I clutch my belly, wrinkling my nose and scrunching my face in an attempt not to bellow out loud at how much it hurts. Everything seems to be contracting all at once, and it takes several moments of me huffing through the pain before I can speak. When I can, I calmly pick up the cords again, starting up where I left off. “It’s not time.”

“Dude. Are you crazy?” Josie’s voice escalates and her hands go on her hips. “That was totally a contraction!”

“What?” Tiffany arrives with the hot tea she fetched for me, a startled look on her face. She sets the pink cup down within my reach from my little fur nest and then moves to the fire to stoke it higher. “Is the baby coming?”

“It is,” Josie says. “I’ll go get Maylak!”

“It’s not,” I correct. Well, okay, it kind of is. “There’s still plenty of time. My water hasn’t even broken.”

“Well I’m not gonna check to see if you’re dilated,” Josie retorts. “We’re buddies but we’re not *that* close. Seriously, I’m going to get the healer.”

“Josie, please.” I hold out the ring that I’m using to braid my leather-macrame hammock. “It can wait, okay? I think I’d know if my baby was coming. Can you help me finish this? I’m so close. Just another hour or two of weaving, I promise.”

She and Tiffany share a dubious look.

They’re good friends to worry about me. “If my water breaks, we’ll get the healer, okay? For now, I really want to finish this.” I wave the ring at her, and when she doesn’t take it, I hold it out to Tiffany.

Tiffany sighs and folds her body gracefully across from my bloated one. “For a little bit longer, then.”

Josie makes an outraged noise but she takes the ring and thumps down. “Fine, fine.”

“Thanks guys. We’re so close to being done.”

“I love you, Megan, but I feel the need to point out that you’re kinda worrying me,” Josie says as she holds the ring and the braided cords out straight so I can move them into place.

“I know.” I work fast, because I’m so close to being done and I want the hammock finished. It’s a lot of cord to braid, but it’s kept me busy over the last two days, and I’m grateful for it. It keeps me focused on the project at hand and not the fact that the weather has picked up, howling and bitter, or that my mate still isn’t home and the baby’s about to make its presence known.

I just...I can’t let the baby be born without his daddy to welcome him into the world. And I can’t worry about the fact that the weather has been so brutally cold that our breath frosts even in the cave, and even the sa-khui themselves have commented on how unusually chilly it is.

Cashol will be fine. He has to be.



THREE HOURS LATER, I’m putting the finishing knots on the hammock when my water breaks.

“That does it,” Josie declares, jumping to her feet. “I’m getting Maylak.”

My belly gives another hard, angry contraction, swallowing my protest. The baby’s coming, and my mate isn’t here. I start to weep, then, because this is all wrong. This isn’t how my baby’s birth is supposed to go.

“Now, now, honey,” Tiffany says soothingly. She takes me by the arm. “Let’s get you on your feet and get cleaned up, okay?”

“Cashol said he’d be here,” I say between sniffles. “He promised.”

“I’m sure he’s on his way back right now.” She rubs my back and helps me up, and then helps me peel off my tunic. “Let’s get some fresh blankets and some water for you to drink. Maylak’s on her way and we’ll get this baby born in no time.”

That just makes me cry harder.

Maylak arrives with Josie a few minutes later, a smile on her gentle blue face. Her hand is on her own rounded belly and she moves to my side, rubbing my arm. “I see our newest tribe member has decided to arrive.”

“But my mate’s not here,” I say tearily. “Cashol said he’d be back for the baby’s birth. He promised.”

Her three-fingered hand touches my belly and in response, another contraction rips through me. “I think your kit is tired of waiting. It is very close now. Your body is ready.”

My body might be, but my brain is still full of protests. Another contraction surges and the intense need to bear down rushes through me.

“Very close,” Maylak murmurs again. “Come. Teef-nee, please spread the birthing furs out for her in the corner so she can squat?”

I weep but let her lead me over. My mind is focused on the worst - Cashol stuck out on the trails, injured and unable to return home. Cashol dead and frozen in the snow. He’ll never see his son born. I’ll never get to hold him again, or hear his silly suggestions for baby names. I just cry harder, because I miss him and need him so much right now.

“I don’t want to raise a family without him,” I wail, even as Maylak holds my hand and leads me over to the fresh furs that Tiffany has spread out. “I can’t do this!”

“You can,” Maylak says in an unruffled voice.

“You’re okay,” Tiffany soothes. Her expression is worried. “Really, Megan, it’s going to be okay.”

“It’s not!”

Maylak rubs her hand on my cramping belly, and I realize I’m naked. I guess it doesn’t matter. It’s not like anything matters if my mate isn’t coming home. “New mothers are always very dramatic in birth,” she says to Tiffany. “She is fine.”

“I’m right here, you jerks,” I say, and then burst into fresh tears. “I can hear everything.”

Josie’s giggle is smothered behind her hand when I give her an angry look. “I’ll just...put the privacy screen up.” She rushes to the front of the cave.

I squat down over the furs and rest on my haunches as Maylak’s strong arm goes around my back.

“When you are ready, bear down,” Maylak says. She touches my belly again and I feel my khui hum in response. Not like resonance, but just responding to the healer. “Almost here. You are very close.”

“I don’t want to be close,” I sob again, but no one’s listening. I want my mate.

Just then, someone pushes aside the privacy screen over the cave entrance. Another contraction rips through me, and I point, because the last thing I want is someone barging in when I’m about to push a baby out of my body. “Door,” I pant. “Door.”

Tiffany gets up and races over. “Hey, that was a damn privacy screen—”

The figure steps forward and it’s a tall sa-khui, positively covered in iced-over furs. His face is hidden behind a hood, and as I watch, one big hand reaches up and claws at the fur. It’s frozen and makes a crunching sound as he pulls it away, and then I see my mate’s beautiful smile.

“Cashol!” I gasp and try to get to my feet, but another contraction is coming.

“I am here,” he says, but there’s exhaustion in his voice. He staggers forward a step, pulling at his furs. Ice and snow drop from his clothing as he unwraps layers from his big body. “Haeden was right behind me—”

Josie squeals and leaps to her feet, dashing out of the cave.

I struggle to get to my feet, but another contraction is coming. Oof. Everything is pressing hard and the intense need to push is returning. I'm torn between bearing down and reaching for my mate.

"Stay here," Maylak says in a soothing voice, squeezing my arm. She gestures for Cashol to come to where I am. "You, come sit. Your kit is almost here."

The look of pure delight on Cashol's face makes my chest hurt with love. I want to smile and laugh at the same time, but the breath hisses out of me and I pant, focusing on the baby.

Then, cold fingers touch my face. I look up into Cashol's tired smile as he kneels at my side. His arm goes around my waist from the opposite side of Maylak, and then they are both supporting me. "I said I would be here," he murmurs. "Our son is ready to join us."

"Might...be...girl," I wheeze. He takes my hand and I squeeze his fingers tightly as another contraction comes. It feels like they're all running together now.

I'm wrong, though. Two minutes later, I give birth to the most perfect, most beautiful baby boy who is the exact same shade of blue as the father that is the first person to hold him in this world.

I start crying again, this time out of sheer happiness. I want to hold the baby but there's the afterbirth and the healer with her hands on my belly, talking my khui into easing the aches and pains a bit. She's speaking, but I'm not listening. I'm fascinated by the look of sheer joy on Cashol's face as he wipes down our son with a soft fur cloth. Tiffany and Maylak help me get up from the birthing furs, which are bundled up with the afterbirth for Cashol to go bury later - a sa-khui ritual. I'm tugged into a new, soft tunic, wrapped in blankets in bed, and then my mate is at my side with our son.

I take the baby gently into my arms. My breasts are leaking and he begins to squall, but I want to look at him first.

"He is perfect," Cashol tells me in a thick voice.

He is. From the teeny tiny horn nubs on his forehead to the shock of thick black hair on his head, he's his father's son. His broad nose and brow are ridged, his little tail flicking against my hand when I go to support his bottom. He doesn't look human in the least bit, and for some reason, I find that utterly enchanting. "Look at how cute our

son is,” I breathe. I unwrap his blankets because I want to see his tiny feet. He’s got five toes instead of four like his father - the only sign that there’s a little of me in this child. “He’s wonderful.”

Cashol nods and just touches my cheek.

I look up and see that his eyes are wet with emotion, and I feel all weepy all over again. Damn, all this crying.

Maylak touches Cashol’s shoulder. “I will return shortly to heal you so you can finish the birth ritual. For now, I must check on Haeden.”

“Heal?” I ask, casting a worried glance over at Cashol. He looks good to me. Tired, but good. “Are you okay?”

“Just a few frozen toes,” he says, touching the baby’s face with a wondering finger. “She will tell my khui to work harder and it will be fine. It was a long, cold walk back.”

I open my mouth to protest when the baby screams loudly. My breasts leak again in response. Oh, right. I need to feed my poor baby. I open the laces on the front of my tunic and push the leather aside, then fit the baby against my breast. I feel awkward - I’ve never breastfed before - but his little head nuzzles against my breast and then he begins to suck.

It’s the most beautiful thing ever.

I touch his downy head, the thick black hair already springy against my fingers as it dries. “We need to decide on a name.”

“Mmm.” He touches the baby’s cheek, as if unable to pull away for a moment. I know how he feels. Already I feel an intense, smothering amount of love for the little life in my arms.

“What, no suggestions?” I tease my unusually quiet mate. “You’ve had tons of them up until now.”

His mouth crooks in a half-smile. “I am terrible with names, as you have said many times. I want him to have the right one. You should name him, my mate.”

Aw. I smile and contemplate the names we’ve tossed around as the baby nurses. None of them seem to fit just right when we squish our names together in the custom that’s been created. Nor do I think a human name seems proper for our little boy who is so clearly sa-khui. “Why don’t we name him after your father?”

A slow grin spreads across my mate’s face. “My father?”

I nod. He's told me many times about his father and how he misses him. He grew up with just his father - his mother having died in childbirth - and was left without family when the khui-sickness hit. "Why not?"

"You...would not mind the name? Holvek is not a very human name." He touches the baby's hand and the three little fingers and thumb close around his finger, holding it tightly.

It's not the most musical name but it's clear that it means a lot to my mate. "I think it's perfect."

His expression of pleasure tells me that it's the right choice.

Little Holvek it is.



MAYLAK RETURNS a short time later and works on healing my mate of his minor aches and pains. The toes are not as bad as originally thought, and he is proclaimed healthy enough to go and finish the birthing ceremony. He takes the bundle of furs and disappears with it, though he's clearly reluctant to leave me and the baby. I do my best to stay awake, but when Holvek nods off, I put him in his basket beside my bed and then take a nap myself.

I wake several hours later, and roll over to see Cashol seated next to the bed, cross-legged. He's got Holvek in his arms again, gazing down with a look of such pleasure that I'm filled with intense joy at the sight of them. "Hi," I whisper. "Is he hungry?"

"He is asleep," Cashol admits, but doesn't hand the baby over just yet. "I could not resist holding him again."

I chuckle and struggle to sit up. Everything aches and is sore, but I don't mind. Life feels pretty perfect at the moment. "I'm so glad you got back in time."

He nods slowly and reaches out with one hand - the baby tucked against his chest - to twine his fingers with mine again. "I knew you needed me."

"Like Rokan's sixth sense?"

He shakes his head. "Just a gut feeling. Plus, I was tired of sharing furs with Haeden."

I giggle quietly. "Sharing furs?"

He nods and begins to tell me about the last few weeks he spent out on the trail. Apparently he and Haeden worked together, both of them eager to return home. “Unfortunately most of the time was spent in the cave snarling at each other while the wind blew.” He squeezes my fingers and gazes down at Holvek. “I wanted to be here with you. Every day it was a struggle, knowing you were both waiting for me.”

“It was all right,” I say, surprising myself with the realization that it was, in fact, not as painful as I’d worried. “I kept busy. I made you a hammock.”

“A hah-mawk? What is this?”

“It’s a sling that keeps you off the ground for sleeping. It’s comfy. I’ll show you later.”

“Another human custom?” He looks amused. “What next? Shall I bathe standing up?”

Actually...

The baby wakes up and I automatically reach for him. Cashol hands him over and snuggles against my side as I begin to nurse Holvek again. I rest my head on Cashol’s shoulder and a wave of utter contentment moves through me. “I forgot to thank you,” I murmur. “For the treasure hunt. That was so thoughtful of you.”

He chuckles and nuzzles against my neck. “I wanted to give you something to look forward to while I was not there to brighten your day.”

I smile. “You did. I’m not good with the treasure hunt, though. I never found the last one.”

“No? It is here.” He leans over the side of the bed.

Puzzled, I watch as he fishes something out from underneath the bundles of leather padding and thick furs that make up the nest of our bed. “What’s here?”

“The last present.” He pulls out a leather-wrapped package, covered with more of the terrible doodles and holds it out to me.

“You open it,” I say softly, gesturing at the baby.

He does, and a moment later, the leather falls open to reveal more of the strange discs with the hole in them. Several, in fact.

“What are those?” I exclaim. “I’ve been trying to figure it out for days.”

Cashol looks surprised. "It is *cons*. Like you told me."

"*Cons*?"

"*Mahnee*?" When I continue to look baffled, he shakes his head. "You told me that humans use *cons* and *mahnee* to give value to things. That you use those instead of barter."

Oh. "Coins," I realize. "Money." I look down at the disks and they seem a little weird to me, but I guess for a guy that didn't even know what an arrow was, these are a pretty good approximation. "Why are you giving me money?"

"To show you how much you mean to me." He picks one up and places it in my lap, then does the same with the next one. "You said that things in your world were valuable if they cost much *mahnee*. You are the thing that I love the most in this world, so I wanted to give you *mahnee* to show you that."

Is...he trying to tell me that I'm priceless to him? I suddenly love each ugly coin and every awkward painted doodle on them. "You are the sweetest," I tell him, my voice thick with emotion.

Cashol shakes his head. "I am just a male devoted to his mate." His hand goes to Holvek's tiny head. "And now his child."

He's perfection, my mate. I gaze up at him adoringly. Sure, he's goofy at times, distractible, and maybe he'll have to leave for weeks on end occasionally to hunt. But he's sweet and he makes me smile and I don't care how cold or desolate this planet is...

There's no place I'd rather be.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is a short story. Just a tiny one! It was only ever intended as a short story. I try to keep the 'full' books a nice, meaty length, but I've had so many people tell me that they would love to see any slice of life in the sa-khui world that I thought I'd go back and give a little time to a few of the couples we skipped over. I'm on deadlines for my New York name, but I couldn't stop playing with a few scenes about Megan and Cashol.

I'm sorry if this feels a bit short (I know some readers hate it when the story ends), but I enjoyed writing a little 'slice of life' instead of a full novel. There will be more of both, of course! If you liked it, I'd love for you to leave a review - those help me gauge what fans want to read more of. Your vote really does count!

A big thank you to Natalie Gordon-Smith, Amanda Kotski, and Annette Cephalis Cody McDonald for suggesting the baby name of Pacy for Stacy and Pashov's baby boy. It's brilliant and I couldn't NOT use it once I heard it.

I went a slightly different route with Holvek's name. Sharp-eyed fans might notice that the 'Hol' in Cashol matches the 'Hol' in Holvek. Sharp-eyed fans might *also* notice that there's more than one 'Vek' in the tribe that we've known of. That's because with such a small group, there's a lot of related people (and one reason why resonances were happening to fewer - inbreeding!). In this case, Cashol and Vektal are cousins. Their fathers were brothers. Maybe someday I'll do a family tree!

THE PEOPLE OF ICE PLANET BARBARIANS

As of the end of HAVING THE BARBARIAN'S BABY
(suggested pronunciations in parenthesis)

AT THE MAIN TRIBAL CAVE

CAVE 1

VEKTAL (Vehk-tall) - The chief of the sa-khui. Mated to Georgie.

GEORGIE – Human woman (and unofficial leader of the human females). Has taken on a dual-leadership role with her mate.

TALIE (Tah-lee) – Their baby daughter.

CAVE 2

Maylak (May-lack) – Tribe Healer. Mated to Kashrem and currently pregnant with child.

Kashrem (Cash-rehm) - Her mate, also a leather-worker.

Esha (Esh-uh) – Their young daughter.

CAVE 3

Sevvah (Sev-uh) – Tribe elder, mother to Aehako, Rokan, and Sessah

Oshen (Aw-shen) – Tribe elder, her mate

Sessah (Ses-uh) - Their youngest son

Rokan (Row-can) – Their oldest son. Adult male hunter.

CAVE 4

Warrek (War-ehk) – Tribal hunter.

Eklan (Ehk-lan) – His father. Elder.

CAVE 5

Ereven (Air-uh-ven) Hunter, mated to Claire

Claire – mated to Ereven, currently pregnant

CAVE 6

Liz – Raahosh's mate and huntress. Currently pregnant for a second time.

Raahosh (Rah-hosh) – Her mate. A hunter and brother to Rukh.

Raashel (Rah-shel) – Their daughter.

CAVE 7

Stacy – Mated to Pashov. Mother to Pacy, a baby boy.

Pashov (Pah-showv) – son of Kemli and Borran, brother to Farli and Salukh. Mate of Stacy, father to Pacy.

Pacy – Their infant son.

CAVE 8

Nora – Mate to Dagesh, mother to twins Anna and Elsa.

Dagesh (Dah-zzhesh) (the g sound is swallowed) – Her mate. A hunter.

Anna & Elsa – Their infant twin daughters.

CAVE 9

Harlow – Mate to Rukh. ‘Mechanic’ to the Elders’ Cave. Spends 75% of her time there with her family.

Rukh (Rookh) – Former exile and loner. Original name Maarukh. (Mah-rookh). Brother to Raahosh. Mate to Harlow.

Rukhar (Roo-car) – Their infant son.

CAVE 10

Megan – Mate to Cashol. Mother to newborn Holvek.

Cashol (Cash-awl) – Mate to Megan. Hunter. Father to newborn Holvek.

Holvek (Haul-vehk) – Wee blue baby!

CAVE 11

Marlene (Mar-lenn) – Human mate to Zennek. Has unnamed child. French.

Zennek (Zehn-eck) – Mate to Marlene. Has unnamed child.

CAVE 12

Ariana – Human female. Mate to Zolaya. Unnamed child.

Zolaya (Zoh-lay-uh) – Hunter and mate to Ariana. Unnamed child.

CAVE 13

Tiffany – Human female. Mated to Salukh and newly pregnant.

Salukh (Sah-luke) – Hunter. Son of Kemli and Borran, brother to Farli, Pashov and Dagesh.

CAVE 14

Aehako (Eye-ha-koh) – Acting leader of the South cave. Mate to Kira, father to Kae. Son of Sevvah and Oshen, brother to Rokan and Sessah.

Kira – Human woman, mate to Aehako, mother of Kae. Was the first to be abducted by aliens and wore an ear-translator for a long time.

Kae (Ki –rhymes with ‘fly’) – Their newborn daughter.

CAVE 15

Kemli (Kemm-lee) - Female elder, mother to Salukh, Pashov and Farli

Borran (Bore-awn) - Her mate, elder

Farli (Far-lee) - Their teenage daughter. Her brothers are Salukh and Pashov. She has a pet dvisti named Chahm-pee (Chompy).

CAVE 16

Drayan (Dry-ann) – Elder.

Drenol (Dree-nowl) – Elder.

CAVE 17

Vadren (Vaw-dren) – Elder.

Vaza (Vaw-zhuh) – Widower and elder. Loves to creep on the ladies.

CAVE 18

Asha (Ah-shuh) – Mated to Hemalo. No living child.

Hemalo (Hee-mah-lo) – Mated to Asha.

CAVE 19

Bek (BEHK) – Hunter.

Hassen (Hass-en) – Hunter.

Harrec (Hair-ek) – Hunter.

Taushen (Tow –rhymes with cow- shen) – Hunter.

CAVE 20

Josie – Human woman. Mated to Haeden and newly pregnant.

Haeden (Hi-den) – Hunter. Previously resonated to Zalah but she died (along with his khui) in the khui-sickness before resonance could be completed. Now mated to Josie.

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PART I

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