

author of Ice Planet Barbarians

RUBY DIXON

ICE
PLANET
BARBARIANS

**AFTER
SHOCKS**

A SLICE OF LIFE SHORT STORY

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ICE PLANET BARBARIANS: AFTERSHOCKS

ON THE DAY THE WORLD SHOOK, EVERYTHING CHANGED FOR THE BARBARIAN TRIBE. THIS SHORT STORY GOES BACK TO THE EVENT AND GIVES ADDITIONAL INSIGHT.

HOW DO RUKH AND HARLOW FARE THROUGH THE DISASTER? HOW DOES THE CHIEF HANDLE THE DESTRUCTION OF EVERYTHING HE'S EVER KNOWN?

THIS SHORT STORY IS A SLICE OF LIFE AND INTENDED TO BE READ AFTER BARBARIAN'S TAMING. IT IS NOT A STAND ALONE. IT IS, HOWEVER, INTENDED TO PROVIDE EXTRA CHARACTER INSIGHT FOR THOSE WHO WANT TO VISIT THE ICE PLANET FOR A LITTLE BIT LONGER.

RUKH

My mate has been sitting at the wall again all day.

“Come away,” I tell her, putting our kit into her hands. “Rukhar wants his mother.”

She looks up at me and gives me an absent smile. “I’m obsessing, aren’t I? I’m sorry.” She gets to her feet, but glances back at the wall with its flashing lights and clicking buttons. “It’s just...I don’t like things I can’t fix, you know?”

I grunt acknowledgment, because the way her mind works is a mystery to me. I know things I can touch and taste. My world is in this moment, with her and our son. I like doing things the way they have always been done. I do not like change. My Har-loh is different, though. She constantly thinks of ways to improve how our people live. To create new things to make changes for the better. She does not see limitations. To me, the thing she stares at all day is just a wall. To her, it is full of ideas and concepts that can help, and she sees herself as the one who must unpack them.

And as her mate, I must be the one to pull her away and remind her to eat and to take care of herself.

Har-loh cuddles Rukhar, pressing kisses on his brow as she gets to her feet and moves close to the fire. I have put on a bit of meat to roast for her, and some of the roots she prefers. If it were up to her, she would eat nothing but roots, but I make her eat good red meat. She needs to stay strong.

Always, I think about how fragile she is. How close I came to losing her. I must protect her in all ways.

“What are you working on today?” she asks distractedly as she sits near the fire. She opens her tunic, revealing one breast, and Rukhar immediately leans in to nurse. “Still trying to fix those hides?”

I get one of her little bowls that she likes—she does not wish to hold handfuls of food as she eats, a concept that is still strange to me—and fill it with more meat and roots than she normally eats. I do not want her getting thin with the brutal season coming. I sit next to her and pick up one of the cubes of fresh meat and offer it to her lips. “Eat.”

She rolls her eyes but smiles at me and obediently eats a chunk, her lips brushing against my fingertips. “You’re so pushy.”

“Because you forget,” I tell her. “Always forget.”

She smiles at me, warmth in her eyes, and my chest burns with sheer joy. My sweet mate. Every day with her is a gift. “I’m lucky I have you to keep my head on straight.”

I frown, eyeing her. “Is not straight?”

Her laughter is like a warm blanket. “It’s a thing humans say.”

I smile at her. “Then I like it on straight.”

I love it when she smiles. I watch her, feeding her another cube of meat when she swallows. She nurses our son, who is old enough now that he watches her with interest and pushes his hands against her teat as he feeds. He eats a mushy version of Har-loh’s roots sometimes, but his fangs are small and not yet ready for meat. I watch as she smooths a hand over Rukhar’s hair and strokes his

horns. Sometimes I am jealous of the attention she gives our son, because I want her to look at me and only me with so much love. But then he looks over at me as he feeds, and a silly, milk-wet smile curves his mouth, and I feel my chest squeeze with affection for my son.

“He looks like you more and more every day,” Har-loh says. “Don’t you think?”

Eh? I gaze at my son. He looks like me? I rub my jaw. I have never seen my own face. “My nose has...bumps.” I reach out and touch Rukhar’s small nose. “His like yours.”

“If you say so,” she teases. “But the rest of him is all you.”

I find it odd that a creature as small as my son would have my face. I thought I would look like my brother, the way Pashov and Salukh have similar features. But my brother Raahosh is ugly and scarred. Am I ugly to Har-loh? Disturbed, I push another chunk of meat into my mate’s mouth.

Rukhar finishes nursing, and Har-loh wipes his mouth with a bit of soft fur and then sets him down on his favorite blanket. He crawls about, reaching for a carved bone toy and then pops it into his mouth, biting it.

“Do you think you can watch him a little longer?” Har-loh asks. “I need to keep working on the computer. It’s a puzzle I can’t quite figure out and it’s bothering me.” Her reddish brows pull together. “It’s like there’s something missing that I’m just not getting.”

“Missing?” I offer her another chunk of food.

She takes it with a dreamy expression, chewing slow. Her thoughts are clearly with the com-pyew-tor. “The dates are all wrong. I just...I don’t know. It’s a hunch I have. Everything says that the sa-khui have been here for almost three hundred years, but when I crunch outside data, it just doesn’t add up.”

“Do what you need,” I tell her. “Rukhar and I will work on the skins.”

Her mouth twitches with amusement. “He’ll help you like he did yesterday?”

I grunt. My son is too curious. Instead of staying on his blankets, he gets into things. Yesterday, he got into the bowls of offal that I use to tan a hide. I recently learned this from Hemalo and wished to create a soft blanket for my mate for the brutal season. All of the furs I know how to make are tough, scraped clean but not very soft. Hemalo’s hides are soft like my mate’s skin. I want the best for her.

But now that Rukhar has spilled all of my tanning fluids, I must figure out another way to make the hides soft. I do not want to waste them. “I will work despite Rukhar’s help.”

Har-loh’s peals of laughter echo in the strange cave. She gets to her feet, and I do, too. Her arms go around my neck and she leans in close, her eyes soft in the way that makes my cock ache. “Maybe after we put him to bed, you can give me a tour of the furs.”

I like that thought. “I can put him to bed now.”

She giggles at my teasing and gives me a kiss. “I will leave you two to your work, and get back to my projects.”

I brush her arm as she goes, desperate to touch my mate again. Sometimes it is difficult to let her work when all I want to do is grab her and pull her leathers off her body until she is naked and under me. I rub absently at my own bare chest, glad that we are away from the tribe and I am free to dress how I please—in not much more than a loincloth.

“Da da!” Rukhar calls out and raises his arms for me.

“I am here,” I tell him, and heft him into my arms. My son. Did I think my life was not complete without my mate? I feel the same fierce love for my small son, but in a different way. He is my heart, just like my Har-loh is.

My ‘heart’ gurgles at me and slaps a hand on my jaw. “Da-da!”

“Da-da work now,” I agree, tucking him under my arm. “Come. We make leather.”



WORKING with a small kit underfoot is not much work at all. Rukhar has a soft blanket that I place him on for him to play while I scrape the large dvisti skin I have stretched out in the snow. Since I do not have the brains and guts of the creature, I have been rubbing the skin with fat and then scraping it to try to soften it...in between retrieving Rukhar. My son is now crawling and uses every opportunity to race away.

I retrieve him out of a nearby snow drift and place him on his blanket again. It is a game he likes to play. He crawls away, and I put him back. He crawls away. I put him back. He crawls away. I put him back. Rukhar finds it fun.

And even though I cannot get much work done on the skins, I also cannot be mad when he smiles up at me, mouth full of drool and his gums punctuated by two small, crooked fangs.

“Stay for a little while,” I tell him again. “We play game later.” The suns will be going down soon, and I will have to pack up my projects and bring them back inside the cave. It is a messy task and so I do it outside, in the snow a short distance away from the cave entrance.

I sit down at my skin.

Rukhar immediately crawls away.

I sigh and crawl after him—and a shiver swells through my legs. I sway, rolling to my back, confused. Is it me? Why is my body trembling? Why do I have no strength? But then Rukhar lets out an angry wail, and I realize it is not me.

It is the ground.

It shivers again, and then begins to roll and tremble. I scoop up my son, ignoring his frightened screams as I stare at the world around

me. Everything is shaking. The trees in the distance move back and forth like they are caught in a windstorm. The ground shakes beneath my feet. I hear the sound of ice cracking, and a massive gorge splits the earth a short distance away. It starts out small, and then grows wider and begins to snake across the snow, widening as it does.

Har-loh. My mate.

“Har-loh!” I scream, looking to the Elders’ Cave. As I watch, the crack moves toward the cave. I race after it, but then the ground shifts away under my feet and I lose my balance. I roll carefully, cradling my son close so my weight does not crush him, and protect his body with mine. All around me, the world groans and shudders, and the snow shakes wildly underneath me.

What is happening?

The world grows dark, and I hear the groan of something new. A crunching sound. A thick fall of snow cascades over my body, dumping from above. I shake it off like a dvesti and look up. The cave has grown in size, the strange rock it is made from uncovered. And it is...moving. I frown at it, surprised. Did Har-loh do this? Did she learn how to make it move?

The ground at my feet shakes harder and gives a strong shift, and I am knocked backward. Dazed, I pick myself up off the snow. Rukhar is wailing, his face flushed with anger, and he raises his arms for me to pick him up again. I do so, crouching low in the snow. I dare not stand and be knocked down again.

As I hold my frightened son against my chest, the shadow rises. The crunching sound gets louder, and as I watch, the cave slides into the gorge.

NO. MY MATE. She’s inside. She’s trapped.

“Har-loh!” I scream so loudly that I feel something burst behind my eyes. I want to approach the cave as it slides, but my son is in my arms. I am torn—can I save my mate? What if I put Rukhar down

into the snow and wild metlaks grab him? I cannot! I race forward, plunging through the newly deep snow, praying it does not cover new cracks or hidden dangers. All the while, the cave slowly slides backward into the gorge. As I watch with horror, the entire thing tilts and upends like a bone disc, revealing the guts of the cave on the underside and leaving a black scar underneath it where it used to be.

The entire thing is going to disappear into the ground and carry my mate with it.

I must do something.

I race forward with Rukhar, holding him tightly. With every step I take, the sick feeling in my gut grows. I wait for this moment to get worse, for the cave to slide away entirely into the ground and disappear.

It heaves upright, like a finger pointing in the air, and then gives a great shudder. It stops.

Everything stops. The ground no longer shakes with anger.

“Har-loh!” I bellow again, pushing forward. I must get to her. Is she hurt? Is she waiting for me to rescue her? Is she...

I think of my father, his dead body lying so still as I put rocks over it.

No.

No, not my Har-loh. Not my mate.

My thoughts are growing wild. Rukhar screams in my arms, but I put a hand on his head to calm him and do little else. I am focused on my mate. I must get to her. *Now.*

The entrance to the cave is now high in the air. I can climb it. I set my wailing son down in the snow at my feet...and then immediately pick him back up again. I cannot climb with him in my arms...but I cannot leave him, either. I howl with frustration, and he howls with me. I must do this. I must.

For the first time, I wish the people of the tribe were here to help out. Normally I am glad to leave them behind because there are so many. Today, I would do anything for an extra pair of hands.

Rukhar grabs a fistful of my hair, wailing. "Ma ma! *Ma ma!*"

His frustration is not helping mine. I must think, but my mind is frantic. I see visions of my father's body and imagine putting rocks over Har-loh's smaller form...and another howl of grief escapes me.

No.

Please, no.

I cannot lose her.

I cannot be alone again.

She is my world. She is my everything.

I grip my son fiercely against my chest and he screams anew, furious at me and scared. I am, too. I press a kiss to his forehead like Har-loh does, trying to think. I need a wrap to hold him to me. I look back, but the leathers I was scraping are long gone, buried in snow or shifted beneath the broken earth. The only thing I have is my loincloth.

I rip it off a moment later. It is not long enough to act as a sling to carry my son, so I grab one edge between my teeth and rip. The leather rends in two, right down the middle. I set my son down and tie the two lengths together, and then pick him up again and tie him to my chest. I place one hand under his bottom, holding him tight against me, and then I begin to climb.

There are not many footholds on the outside of the cave, but there are small cracks. I force my fingernails into them to act as a grip, ignoring the pain that shoots up my fingers. My pain does not matter. Only Har-loh matters.

The climb seems endless, but I make my way to the entrance and then surge to the lip, holding on tight. "Har-loh!"

Lights flicker. It is dark inside, the fire having gone out. More of the strange lights flash here and there, and the cave itself is now one long pit. The lights flash again...

And then I see my mate.

Her body is cast down at the bottom of the pit, resting on what used to be a wall.

There is blood everywhere.

She is not moving.

"*HAR-LOH!*" I scream, and something inside me breaks.

HARLOW

A low growling breaks through a haze of pain. Everything hurts, but I force my eyes open. There's something sticky dried across my face, and my back feels like one big bruise. When I suck in a breath, a sharp, stabbing pain radiates from my middle. But I'm alive, so there's that. I'm disoriented, and a heavy weight is on my chest, making it hard to draw a deep breath.

It's dark. I blink slowly, trying to adjust to the low light. There's a bright spot high overhead that hurts my eyes to look at, so I avoid it and look for the growling. It's there, at my side. Rukh's crouching next to me, shifting back and forth. He's hovering so close that his tail flicks against my shoulder and I can feel the warmth radiating from his body. Something shifts on my chest, and I realize Rukhar is lying on top of me. "W-what happened?" I ask, not quite ready to get up and face the pain yet.

Rukh just makes a low snarl in his throat. "*Har-loh.*" The word is guttural and...savage.

Fear slices through me, not for myself, but for him. I force my body into a sitting position, ignoring the protest of my ribs, and hold Rukhar close to me. I reach out to touch Rukh gently, my hand caressing his knee. "Are you okay?"

He sucks in a deep breath, but doesn't answer. He touches my face. "Har-loh."

I'm growing worried. His glowing eyes are bright, but there seems to be something...brittle inside them. Like all is not right in his head. "Rukh," I say gently, rubbing my thumb over his knee. "I'm here. We're okay."

He doesn't say anything, just continues to stroke my face.

Uh oh. I run my hand over his jaw, making sure he's not wounded. My mate has never been a huge talker, but this silence is worrying me. I pick up Rukhar and offer him to Rukh. "Can you hold him?" I'm going to try to stand up and see what the situation is...and I want to see how he reacts to our son. It's clear something's wrong, but it's also clear that wherever we are, we can't stay here. Something hard is shoving against my hip, and it's dark. It feels claustrophobic. I can't quite place where I am, and I feel like I should be able to. I feel like there's something I'm missing.

But I'm most worried about Rukh. He's my rock. He's my world—him and Rukhar. If something happened to him...I shudder because I don't want to think about that.

Rukh takes the baby from me and holds him gently against his chest. His focus is still on me, but that's all right. One step at a time. I keep my hand on his leg as I try to get to my feet—and fail. The moment I rise, I get dizzy and have to sit down again. My body breaks out in a cold sweat.

And my mate starts growling again.

I sink to the ground again, pressing my forehead against Rukh's arm. "I'm sorry. Give me just a moment."

"Har-loh," he rasps, and I hurt all over again at the pain in his voice.

"I'm fine," I tell him, even though I'm not. The stabbing pain in my side isn't going away, and I want to cry because everything hurts so much. My brain feels scrambled and it's hard to focus. But we're

alive. I have vague memories of being inside the ship when everything shook and then—

I gasp, sitting upright again and looking around. In the dark, it's hard to make out anything. I feel the floor underneath me, though, and I can feel a few familiar squares that feel like keyboard keys.

Oh my god. This narrow, dark pit? This is the ship.

“What happened?” I ask Rukh. “Tell me.”

He pulls Rukhar close and ignores the baby's smacking fists. He presses his mouth to the top of Rukhar's head and I think for a moment he's not going to answer. But then he speaks, slowly, as if trying to remember the words. “Cave...move.”

The ship moved? I peer up, to the bright spot that hurts my eyes. I try to force myself to look even though it makes my head throb. It's the door we use to come in and out of the ship...and it's about a hundred feet up.

The ship is *sideways*.

I'm suddenly terrified. If the ship is sideways, what is it resting on? We might be in danger even now. “Rukh, we have to get out of here.”

He growls again, and I'm hoping it's acknowledgment.

I stare up at the doorway and wonder how we're going to get there. We have Rukhar, and I'm having a hard time sitting up, much less climbing out of a wall. Hot tears threaten, but I swipe them away. Now is not the time. I have to save my baby and my mate. “Can you carry Rukhar?” I ask him. “I don't think I can carry him up the wall.”

“Carry,” he rasps, and touches my cheek. “Har-loh carry. Rukhar carry.”

He wants to carry me? It's sweet, but I want them to get out first. “I can manage,” I tell him, crawling to my hands and knees. If I go slow, maybe I can do this. Heck, I don't have a choice— I *will* do this. “Everything is going to be fine, Rukh.”

My mate pulls my son close to his chest and tucks him into what looks like a leather sling. He gets to his feet and then looks down at me, waiting. It's clear he's not leaving without me.

Okay. I need to move, then. I slowly get to my feet. Once there, everything seems to hurt worse and my rib feels like it's stabbing a hole in my gut. I need something to lean on, and am grateful when Rukh is there, cradling me close. "*Har-loh.*"

Rukhar starts to wail.

"I know," I say, trying not to breathe in too deep. "I'm coming. Take Rukhar out of here if you can. I'll be right behind you."

He puts an arm around my shoulders, ignoring my request.

"No," I tell him, pushing away his touch. It hurts—both physically and mentally—to do so, but my little Rukhar is screaming and I'm worried over him and my mate. I need them safe. Being in the belly of the ship while it's turned on its side is terrifying me. I need them out so I can concentrate on rescuing myself. "No, Rukh. I need you to take him to safety. Get him out of here. *Now.*" When he hesitates again, I continue. "If you love me, you'll do that."

Rukh makes a pained groan, and I can hear his tail flicking against the floor angrily. He's mad at me—and hurt—but I need them to be safe.

"I'm right behind you," I promise him. Somehow I will be.

With a snarl of frustration, he flings himself away, and I watch as he moves to the wall and begins to climb it with effortless ease. Rukhar's wails grow stronger, and my body vibrates with anxiety. My need to be a mother and protect him wars with my need to tumble back to the floor and take a break from standing. I'm already exhausted, my legs strangely weak. But I can't stay here.

I watch as Rukh climbs, and as he disappears into the sunlight above, I get a flash of bare ass and a glimpse of his sac swinging between his legs as he climbs out. Naked? Wonder what happened there. The sight of it is enough to make me smile, though, and it

rejuvenates me. I can do this. I need to be with them. Rukhar needs me desperately...and Rukh might need me even more than that.

I take a shuffling step forward. Pain lances through my body, and I double over, which only causes more pain. Everything hurts. Everything. I'm starting to worry I might not be able to make it up the wall. Floor. Whatever.

Rukh did it, I remind myself. He's out there with your baby, waiting for you. You don't have a choice.

And I don't, so I push forward another step. Then another. I make it to the wall and put my hands on it, feeling around for a handhold. There's not much, but I manage to wedge my fingers into a crack and pull myself up. Just a little. The next handhold is even higher up, so I heave myself forward to reach it.

My entire body protests. My head swims. The world goes black.

GEORGIE

I'm worried about Vektal.

It's hard being the chief. And normally my mate handles everything with calm, with a fair gaze regardless of his personal feelings. Exiling Hassen? It weighed on him because he understood Hassen's reasons. He understood the soul-crushing loneliness of wanting a mate. And Hassen was a friend. But an example had to be set for the tribe. I know it kept him awake many nights, worrying if he was destroying his friend. If the punishment was just. Being chief means he's responsible for everyone. That in a time of crisis, they look to him to fix everything.

And I don't think this can be fixed.

I look over at my mate, who's busy tying what few goods we have onto a makeshift sled. Others are standing around in the early morning, trying to ignore the cold, or the ash that's falling like snow. Nearby, Analay cries despite Ariana's soothing of him.

"Cover your mouth, little one," I tell Talie as she pulls the leather bib off her face again. I replace it carefully, letting it hang off her nose so she can breathe, but it has to go on. I point at my own bib. "See? Like Mommy."

“Da da,” she tells me.

“Not like da da,” I say. Vektal’s not wearing a mouth cover, even though I’ve suggested repeatedly that he should. I don’t like the thought of us sucking in all this ash. I also don’t know that a piece of leather over our mouths is going to do the trick, but we don’t have any other options. Talie ignores my request and tugs on the bib again, and I put it back. Again. It’s a game we’ve been playing all morning. I’m trying not to get upset at her, because she’s a baby. But my patience is strained thin and I’m just as worried as everyone else.

We’re homeless. I look back at the wreck of what used to be the cave. It’s completely collapsed. The cave that everyone lived in. The cave that my daughter was born in. The cave that Vektal brought me to because it meant safety and family and home. It’s nothing now. And the shock I feel can’t be anything compared to the shock that the sa-khui must be feeling.

At my side, Claire bursts into sudden, noisy tears.

“Are you okay?” I ask, rubbing Talie’s back. She’s still at the age where if she sees someone crying, she starts to cry, too.

“I don’t m-mean to be mean, Georgie, but that’s a s-s-stupid question,” Claire blubbers, wiping at her face. It smears ash all over her cheeks, leaving dark streaks. “I’m homeless and hormonal and pregnant. Of course I’m not okay. Where are we going to *live*?”

Poor Claire. Her belly seems to be growing by the day, and as it does, her anxiety is ratcheting up. I don’t blame her—the timing is not great. But I can be reassuring. “There’s a runner out to the South Caves right now,” I tell her in a firm voice. “We can winter there. It’ll be a tight squeeze, but we’ll manage. And in the spring—sorry, the bitter season—we can look for a better home, or fix the one we’ve got.” I move forward and pat her shoulder. “It’s going to be fine, I promise.”

It’s a lie, of course—I don’t know if it’ll be fine, but it has to be. We don’t have any other options.

“Oh sure,” Claire says, sniffing. “God, I’m such a mess. I didn’t realize how crazy I would get when pregnant.”

“We all had those moments,” I tell her. I think of the baby in my own stomach, a secret for now. Vektal and I recently resonated again, and I know I’m carrying. A second resonance is a little strange. You still resonate to your mate off and on after the first initial ‘song,’ but when you resonate a second time, it feels different. The song itself feels pitched differently, though you’re just as horny. I think that’s the reason why we’ve been able to keep it a secret so far. No one knows but us.

Now’s a bad time to think about that sort of thing, though. We have to focus on the tribe. This baby’s not coming for at least thirteen months, so there’s plenty of time to worry about it later. For now, I have to keep my tribe together—and that means being a cheerleader to my human girls, even when I want to sit down and bawl like Claire. “Are you ready to travel? Where’s Ereven?”

“He’s helping Kemli and Borran make a second sled. I told him to leave me alone because I needed a moment.” She wipes at her face again. “Clearly I need more than just one.” She gets all teary again and clutches at my arm. “Tell me we’re going to be okay, Georgie. I need to hear it.”

“We’re absolutely going to be okay, Claire. It’s a cave. We made it out and that’s all that’s important.” I look over at Warrek, who’s struggling. Not all of us made it out alive. His elderly father, Eklan, was crushed in his own bed. Grief threatens to clog my throat at the thought. Eklan was sweet. Gray-haired, still strong but starting to fade, and always kind. He made the fur blankie that’s around my Talie right now.

And Pashov...we still don’t know if Pashov is going to make it. I can’t think about that right now, or the fact that Stacy might be a widow soon. I hug Claire close and give her a reassuring smile. “As long as we’re together, nothing bad can happen.”

“Ho!” someone calls in the distance. I turn, and as I do, Vektal rushes past. He’s racing toward Haeden and Josie, sent out to check the South Caves yesterday.

Was it only yesterday? We’ve been homeless for almost two days now and it feels like eternity.

Please have good news, I silently beg. I watch Vektal sprint through the dirty snow toward them, and I can practically see the tension vibrating through his big blue body. We need a win right now. I watch them speak, and then a moment later, Vektal bows his head.

Oh, no.

My heart hurts for my mate. I can see an almost imperceptible slump in his shoulders. The news isn’t good. We’ll manage, then. We’ll figure something out. I hold Talie tightly as Vektal returns to our small camp with Josie and Haeden. His face is grim, and I can tell by the firm set of my mate’s mouth that he’s unhappy. “Bad?” I ask, moving forward to meet them.

“Gone,” Vektal says in a gruff voice. He reaches out and brushes his knuckles along my jaw. I’m not sure if he’s trying to comfort me...or himself. He ruffles Talie’s curly hair and then looks at me. “We wait no longer, then. We go to the Elders’ Cave as planned.”

I want to ask questions. I want to see where his thoughts are, because I can tell he’s not happy. I want him to open up to me and let me share his burdens. But everyone’s looking at us and we need to be strong and take charge right now. So I nod and turn to the cluster of people standing around. “Everyone, have your things ready to go within the hour. Let’s get packed up. We can be at the cave by nightfall if we hurry.”

Vektal gives my shoulder an absent squeeze, and I feel his tail flick around my waist, almost like a hug. “I must go help the healer ready Pashov to travel.”

“Do what you need to. I’m fine.” I smile brightly at him so he won’t worry about me. “I’ll round up the others and get everyone moving.”

He gives me a smile that doesn't reach his eyes, and then bounds away, heading to the makeshift tent where Pashov and Maylak have been huddled for the last day and a half. I watch him go, and then turn to the other humans waiting nearby. Claire has been joined by Ariana and Josie and Megan. They're all looking to me like I've got answers. So I gesture at the spread of gear by the fire pit. "Let's get this together, all right? Ariana, take Talie so I can help pack things up, would you? And let's make sure someone grabs Stacy's things, because I don't want her to have to worry about it right now."

And then we're busy, and there's no time left to worry, because there's too much to do.



VEKTAL SEES THE BROKEN, lopsided carcass of the Elders' Ship before I do. He's dragging a sled of supplies behind him, and I'm holding Talie as we walk. He's everywhere as we travel, trying to take care of the tribe. He takes over for Taushen when Pashov's litter gets to be too heavy. He helps Kashrem pull Maylak's travois for a while—because the healer is too exhausted to walk. He carries infants, drags sleds, and heads to the back of our group to help stragglers catch up. He's everywhere, with a seemingly endless supply of energy.

He's a good leader, my mate. He's hiding the fact that he's just as worried as the rest of us. I know that later, when he and I are alone, all of that positivity is going to come crashing down. But until then, he's putting on a brave face. I've been watching him closely, and that's how I know something's wrong. His steps slow, and then all the color drains from his face.

"What is it?" I ask. I turn to see what he's looking at...and then I feel sick.

Over the next ridge, something is sticking out high into the sky. Something black and metal. I realize after a few moments that it's the Elders' Ship—and that underneath all the snow and ice that coats it, it's black. And it's on its side.

Oh no. “Harlow and Rukh?” I ask softly. “Rukhar? Do you think they’re all right?” I don’t think we can bear to lose more people. Not Harlow, with her sunny attitude and freckles. Not Rukh, who’s still getting used to people. Not their sweet little boy Rukhar. If the ship is destroyed, we’ve lost so much with the loss of the computer...but right now all I care about are the tribesmates. “You don’t think they were inside, do you?”

“I do not know,” Vektal says. He drops the sled he’s dragging behind him and then takes me by the arm. “Georgie, I must go ahead—”

“I know,” I tell him in a soft voice. “Go and see. We’ll catch up with you.” Our little party is slow to travel, and something like this feels like it can’t wait. If Rukh and Harlow are in trouble, every second might count. “We’ll meet you there.”

He nods and takes a step forward, and then pauses. He rushes back to me and grips me tight in a bear hug, squishing Talie between us. My heart nearly breaks for him. My mate. I want to help. I want to fix this, but I don’t know that there’s anything that can be done except ride out the aftermath. “I love you,” I tell him softly.

Vektal presses his forehead to mine, caressing my cheek. Then he steps away. “Haeden! Ereven! To me!” When the other two jog forward, he continues. “We must go ahead and check things. Georgie will lead the others to the Elders’ Cave.” His gaze fixes on me.

“I got this,” I call out. “You guys go ahead.”

My mate nods at me, and then the three men are racing across the snow. I pray that they find Harlow and Rukh alive and well. I pray that there’s not anything bad on the other side of this cliff.

First the home cave. Then the South Cave. Now this.

We could really use a win right now.

VEKTAL

I did not think that things could get worse.

Clearly, I am a fool.

We find the Elders' Cave. A giant crack has opened up in the ground, and it looks as if the cave has pulled itself from the ground and slid into the hole created. One end hangs high in the air, casting a shadow over the snow underneath. The entire valley has changed. It looks ripped apart, the snow churned as if many herds of dvisti stormed through. New cliffs have risen and the old ones are crumbling. The world has changed in an eye-blink, it feels. For turn upon turn, I have known this world. I have known every valley, every cliff, every cave, every mountain. Now I look upon it as a stranger, and I am worried.

We find Rukh in the shadow of the cave, clutching his bloody, unmoving mate to his chest while his son crawls nearby. Rukh is covered in ash and unclothed. Har-loh looks wounded, but when we approach, Rukh snarls and reacts so badly that we keep a safe distance. Haeden scoops up Rukhar and frowns in my direction. "What do we do now?"

"We retrieve the healer," I say, watching Rukh. He strokes his mate's face, caressing her cheeks. I do not think she is dead, but it is clear she needs healing. I am selfish, but I worry for the entire tribe when I see Rukh snarling and acting wild.

Now I have two hunters with no mind—Rukh and Pashov. I cannot afford to lose more. The tribe must eat through the brutal season, and we are rapidly running out of hunters.

I...do not know what to do. Where my people can go. Where we can be safe. There are so many kits to think of, and our mates...

My Georgie. My precious mate. Nothing must happen to her. For a moment, I feel as savage and wild as Rukh. If my Georgie was hurt? I would act the same.

To lose home and mate both? It makes me feral just thinking about it.

I take Rukhar from Haeden and sit with him in the snow while Ereven and Haeden rush back to the group to bring the healer. I play with the kit, keeping an eye on his father and his too-still mother. Rukhar is my Talie's age, though she is larger than him. She will be tall, my daughter. I like the thought.

Rukhar snuffles and looks up. His face scrunches into an angry expression, and for a moment, he looks just like his father. "Ma ma."

"She is asleep, little one," I tell him, and pull my sling off of my belt so he can play with it. "The healer will be here soon, and then your mother will awaken." I hope.

He plays with the sling for a time, but then flings it aside and begins to wail. At his cries, Har-loh stirs, but Rukh continues to hover over her, snarling at me as if I will take her from him. I am glad to see she lives, though I worry for her. And I worry for Maylak, who has so many injuries she cannot possibly fix them all without destroying herself.

It is...a bad time. For all of us.

I cannot dwell on my worries, though. I must come up with a solution. A new place for my people to live. To keep my mate and my kit safe through the brutal season. To keep *all* of my people safe. It is my duty.

And I feel like I am failing them. All of them.

I comfort Rukhar as he cries. He is hungry, and cold, and tired, and scared. I am, too, but I can at least help where I can. I give him a piece of dried meat to gnaw on. He might be too young for it yet, but it keeps him quiet and occupied.

"Ho," a voice calls in the distance, and I pick Rukhar up and turn. It is Kashrem and Haeden and Ereven, dragging the travois behind them with the healer. They are racing over the snow, and in the distance, I see dark blots that tell me the rest of my people are not far behind. Good. Some of the anxiety tightening my chest loosens a bit. I head over to meet them.

Maylak needs help getting up from her seat on the travois, and her little girl, Esha, is tucked in next to her, baby Makash at her breast. "Take me to him," Maylak says.

"He is not himself."

"He will let me near to help his mate," she says in a calm, firm voice. "I know it."

Kashrem collapses, panting and catching his breath, while Ereven supports Maylak and brings her toward Rukh. I am handed a second kit, and Haeden takes Makash.

"Are we camping tonight, my chief?" Esha asks in her sweet, tiny voice. She grabs one of my braids to hold on to as she settles into the crook of my arm.

Haeden and I exchange a look. He knows as well as I do that it is not safe to climb into the Elders' Cave, even if we could reach the entrance. Not with it perched on the mouth of a deep crevice. "Yes," I say after a moment, my heart hurting. "Tonight we camp again."

She gives me a bright smile, delighted with this answer. "I like camping!"

Haeden snorts and rolls his eyes, but a hint of a smile tugs at his mouth. "At least one of us does."

Esha just beams at me, pleased.

I look over where Maylak is moving to Rukh's side. She kneels next to him and I see him stiffen in response. I tense, worrying that I will have to help Ereven pull him off of her, but Rukh relaxes a moment later, and then Maylak is at his side, her hands touching Har-loh's face. The expression on Rukh is one of terror and hope, and I ache for him. I know what it is to fear losing your mate.

I think of Pashov. My friend. A good hunter and always pleasant. I think of his mate, who has been beside herself with worry and fear. Kashrem comes to my side and there is strain on his face, his gaze on his mate. He worries she will push herself too far.

There are so many to worry about right now.

“Do you like camping, my chief?” Esha asks me, tugging on my braid.

I would give anything to have our cave safe and whole again. I think of Eklan, who cared for me like a father, and I feel a stab of grief. I could not keep him safe. As a chief, I failed him. I look over at Rukh, Har-loh, and Maylak, and think for a long moment before answering. “I like my tribe around me,” I tell Esha finally. “I do not care where we are at, as long as we are together.”

Haeden grunts approval, and we both go silent to watch the healer work.



WHEN THE REST of the tribe arrives, no questions are asked. My Georgie takes one look at the Elders' Cave and then begins to direct the others to set up camp. There are a hundred things that must be done—food must be gathered, supplies protected from the elements, tents pitched, the injured tended—and everyone looks to me for answers. There is not enough time to do everything, but I cope as I can. I do not want to push anyone away or make them feel like I have no time for them. They are my people and they need their chief, so I must lead them.

My Georgie never ceases to amaze me with her bravery and courage. She immediately gets to work as well. While I am helping set up tents and doling out skins, she is taking control of the camp. She and a few of the human females build a big central fire, and as the hunters bring in meat, she sets others to work. When Claire starts to cry, Georgie hands her Talie and sets her near the fire. When Ariana panics, Georgie has her take care of Stay-see's little Pacy. Someone makes a stew. Another begins to make warm clothes for Mar-layn, who got out of her cave with little more than her kit and her mate and has nothing. By the time the suns go down and it grows dark, most of the tents have been set up, food is cooking, and everyone is gathered by the fire. My mate has it all under

control, and she is leading her females and keeping as many as she can busy while I work with the others.

I check on Maylak; the healer has collapsed again, her kit taken out to be nursed. Har-loh is on the mend, sleeping peacefully. Even Rukh looks calmer, and I suspect the healer has put her hands on him as well. He sleeps beside his mate, and Rukhar is out with Kemli so they may sleep. Maylak and Kashrem are curled around each other, sleeping as well. I must remember that we should save them food for when they awaken.

I move to the next tent, where Pashov is resting. A nest of furs has been set up to keep him comfortable in the small tent, but he looks the same as ever—his eyes are closed, his face is bruised and swollen, and one horn has been broken off. It will grow back, but it makes me wince at the sight. Stay-see is at his side, her hair a mess and her face paler than usual. She holds his hand tightly in hers. “How is he?” I ask.

“He hasn’t woken up,” Stay-see replies, voice soft. “He’s sleeping and he’s breathing fine, but he just won’t wake up.”

“He will,” I tell her in a firm voice and give her shoulder a touch. “Do you need anything?”

“I need my mate to wake up,” she says, voice wobbling. “That’s what I need.”

“We all do. He is my friend as well. I would like nothing more than for him to wake up and laugh with us.”

She sniffs and swipes at her cheeks. “Right.” She nods, her gaze never lifting from her mate. “I’m okay, but thank you for asking.”

“Would you like to come by the fire for a bit and eat?”

“No, I think I’ll stay here. I don’t want him to wake up and be alone.” Her voice wobbles again. “Is Pacy with Georgie still? Does she need to bring him back to me?”

“He is taken care of. Watch over your mate. Let me know if you need anything.”

“I will. Thank you.” She lifts Pashov’s bigger hand to her mouth and kisses his knuckles. “You’ve seen this kind of thing before, right? Where Maylak healed someone? He’s going to live, isn’t he?”

I do not wish to lie, but...I do not know what to tell Stay-see. I have seen many live, and I have seen others die from less. “If he can be healed, she will fix him,” I tell her. “For now, we must wait.”

“That’s a terrible answer,” she whispers. “But thank you for not lying to me.”

I leave the small tent behind, aching for my friend and his mate. By the fire, Farli is braiding cords with Meh-gan, her little dvisti pet in her lap. Georgie looks over at me and gives me a little nod. Things are under control.

For now.

Vektal

There are not enough tents to go around. Even though the sa-khui make use of all parts of the animals we hunt, we have lost much of what we owned. The tent that Georgie has claimed as ours is small and barely big enough for the two of us to squeeze into. Add in that Pacy is sleeping with us tonight, as well as Esha? It is very... crowded.

Georgie puts a finger to her lips as I open the tent and join her. It is late, and the fire is dying down. One of the hunters will stay up all night to keep watch over the camp and ensure that the fires remain burning to frighten off any curious metlaks. Everyone else is going to sleep and try to forget for a few hours.

I would like to forget, myself. And I can think of no better place to do this than in my mate's arms. She is curled up in the furs, an enticing sight. I strip off my leathers and tug off my boots, not an easy task given that I cannot stand upright. My mate checks on the kits—all three bundled together on the side of our furs, and then holds a hand out to me.

I join her, sinking into her arms. She is warm and soft and smells like smoke and wind and milk. I love the scent and breathe in deep,

nuzzling against her teats. Some of the stress I am carrying falls away.

“How are you holding up?” Her voice is a mere whisper. She strokes my mane, her small fingers dragging through the tangles.

I close my eyes and just hold her for a long, long time.

“That good, hmm?” She caresses my jaw and then traces her fingers over my brow ridges. “It’s going to be okay.”

“I do not know if it will be, my sweet resonance.”

She cups my jaw and forces me to look up at her. She is beautiful in the low light, her smooth human face perfect in the shadows. I love her round cheeks, her flat forehead, her strangely curly hair. I love everything about my mate. So much that it hurts to think of her lying still and lifeless, like Pashov. I am lucky she was one of the first out of the cave. “It’s hard right now because you are the leader,” she tells me. “But you are doing a fantastic job. I promise. No one could ask for more.”

I grunt, because I do not know that I agree. All I see is more to be done, and my people are yet sleeping in the snow. “I do not know where we can go.”

“We’ll figure something out.”

“I wish I could do more.” I think of Stay-see, holding Pashov’s hand with a desperate fierceness. Maybe she needs more furs—it is cold tonight. I start to get up—

—Only for Georgie to pull me back down against her once more. “Stay,” she murmurs. “You’re allowed to take a few hours for yourself. And it’ll all be there in the morning. You need your sleep.”

I hesitate.

She tugs at my arm, trying to pull my larger body against her, and I give in. It is too nice to hold on to my mate. After the day I have had, nothing gives me greater pleasure. I sink into her embrace once

more, letting her wrap her arms around me. As our bodies press together, I can feel the low hum of my khui singing to hers.

Even in all this, our bodies remember each other. I stroke her soft skin, thinking of our second resonance we had just a short time ago. Then, I was filled with joy. One kit is a gift beyond words. Two seems like an incredible bounty. And yet...now that we have no home, I am filled with worry. Will I have someplace safe for my Georgie and Talie to live during the brutal season? They cannot stay in tents. Georgie's human body is much too fragile, and Talie is too young.

My tribe has grown an enormous amount in the last few seasons. I do not know how we will manage. There are so many humans and kits to protect, more than ever before. They must be protected at all costs.

"I can practically hear you worrying," my mate whispers. "Harlow and Rukh and their kit are alive. It doesn't matter that we lost the Elders' Cave. We'll find someplace new to live. Give the runners a chance to come back, and see what they found."

"You sound so sure."

She chuckles low. "Oh, I've had my share of freak-outs. Sometimes I look around and just want to scream and throw my hands up and wait for someone else to fix things. But you know what? That's not going to happen. And did you see Maddie just jump in and start taking charge? I saw her do that and I realized I can't sit around. You are the leader. I'm your mate. That means we have to lead, together."

"You are not frustrated?"

"Oh, I want to scream and cry as much as the next person. But our tribe needs a leader, and you can't do it all on your own. I'm trying to pick up the slack where I can and help out.

I am humbled. I hug her tightly to me. "You are the best of mates."

"We're in this together, you and I." She strokes my cheek again, her caress loving. "It's all going to work out. I've been in worse

situations. Remember when we humans crash-landed here with nothing but a pair of pajamas? At least now we have food and blankets and, well, a clue.” Her chest shakes with a suppressed laugh. “We got through that, and we’ll get through this. All of us. Together.”

Perhaps she is simply telling me what I need to hear. Perhaps she is giving me the same emotional support she gives the tribe. It does not matter, because it is what I need to hear. My mate has all the confidence in me. That I will not fail us.

And I will never let her down.

HARLOW

I watch my mate sleep next to me. Rukh’s face is relaxed in slumber, but there’s no hiding the dark circles under his eyes. I’m guessing he hasn’t slept in days, and it’s all because of anxiety over me. I love my mate, but I’m worried about him. He hasn’t been himself.

Then again, I suppose I haven’t, either.

I only have vague memories of my injury. Just a lot of pain, a conversation with Rukh down in the belly of the ship, and then a lot more pain. Flashes of warmth and Maylak’s kind face.

Maybe it’s good I can’t remember. I think about the ship being broken, being lost to us. It’s our only connection to technology, and within the depths of the near-incomprehensible computer, there’s so much information and so much that can help us make our lives better here, if only I can get to it. It’s obsessed me for the last six months or so.

But then again, maybe it’s a good thing that it’s gone. I know I’ve tried to make new equipment for the sa-khui, only for it to be met with distrust. A space heater? No one wanted it. No one trusted it. My stone-cutter? No one used it but me. The language download is the only thing that anyone found useful, but they didn’t trust that, either. Sometimes I feel like I’ve been pushing what I want on the

tribe versus what they actually want for themselves. So, yeah, if they're happy with spears and slings and fur blankets, maybe that's what we leave it at, then.

My breasts feel achy and full, and I know my son needs to be fed. Somewhere outside of our small tent, a baby cries. It's not him, but my body reacts just the same—my breasts start to leak.

At my side, Rukh stirs, blinking awake at the child's cry. His gaze focuses on me, and then a fierceness comes into his gaze. He wraps his arms around me and holds me crushingly tight against him. "Har-loh."

"Hey there," I murmur, sliding my hands over his bare shoulders. He feels tense, as if he's still carrying the worries of the world inside his chest. I feel my khui thrum in response to his nearness, and he responds. I smile. "Listen. We're singing together. We must be feeling better."

The look he gives me is full of hurt and worry. His big hand caresses my face. "My mate. You...hurt? Healer?"

At least he's speaking again. I'm relieved, and at the same time, I suspect that while Maylak was working on me, she might have worked on him a little as well. "I'm fine. Leave her alone. I'm sure she's tired."

The look on his face grows stubborn. "If you need—"

"I don't," I promise him. "Truly. What I need to know is if you and Rukhar are all right. Where is our son?"

He rubs a hand over his face, as if struggling to focus. He still looks exhausted, poor thing. "With...Shorshie. She helps."

I make a mental note to thank Georgie later. I can relax, then, if he's with her. She'll make sure he's fed and kept happy. My focus turns to my mate. "How are you feeling?"

"I no matter. You—"

I press my fingers to his mouth to stop his words. “No, I’m serious, Rukh. Are you okay? You scared me.”

His eyes widen, and then a scowl crosses his face. “I scare *you*? You...you...” He threads his fingers through my hair and then buries his face against my shoulder. “I nearly lose *you*.”

“I’m fine,” I tell him, though I’m downplaying how I felt. Before the healer got here, I wasn’t fine. I was pretty out of it. “I know you’re worried, but Rukh, you worried me, too. We have to think of Rukhar. If you have to choose between him and me, always choose him—” I break off when he growls low in his throat, like an animal.

So I smack him on the arm, because I’ve had enough of that shit.

He sucks in a breath and looks at me with a shocked, wounded expression.

“I’m mad at you!” I tell him. “How dare you fucking lose your shit! We have a baby! Our son! He needs us!”

Rukh’s look of pain doesn’t sway me.

“How do you think I feel, knowing that when I was hurt, my mate totally lost his mind and endangered my son? It’s not just you and me now, Rukh. We have a child to think about. I know you were scared and worried about me, but you have to, have to think about Rukhar. I don’t know what I would have done if something had happened to me and you weren’t able to take care of him. I can’t bear to think of our son alone, just like your father left you alone.”

He flinches. My words hurt him. I feel like the meanest, cruelest mate ever, but all I can think about is my little Rukhar, left without both parents—me, dead, and his father gone feral. It’s not a pretty thought.

“Did you not think about Rukhar? We have to be strong for him, even when one of us is in trouble. He has to come first.”

“I think of him,” Rukh tells me in a gruff voice. “I think of Rukhar. Always. But then I think of my father, and how he did not live after

my mother die. All day, he move. But he not *live*." He presses a hand to his chest. "I no want to do to Rukhar. But...without Har-loh, I no *live*."

Tears burn my eyes. I reach out and touch his face, because I love the big guy so much and it hurts to see him in pain. "I love you, too, and I wouldn't want to go on without you, either. But we're parents. We can't be selfish and think just about ourselves. Would you want to do to your son what your father did to you? Leave him alone in the world? To fend for himself?"

He shakes his head slowly. "All I could see was you...and blood. I not think."

I nod. "I love you and I would never leave you if there's any other chance. Any at all. You know I'd follow you anywhere. You wouldn't even have to ask. Just know that I'm always at your side."

Instead of comforting him, he looks further troubled by my words.

"What is it?" I ask.

He smooths a big hand down my arm, then my side, as if he has to touch all of me and make sure for himself that I'm all right. "I think... many times I think about go back to cave. By ourselves."

"The sea cave?" I ask. It's where we spent last year.

Rukh nods, still moving his hands all over me. It feels good. I'm too tired and spent to be aroused, but just his touch feels wonderful. I could never get tired of it. "Sea cave," he agrees. "But...no healer. Har-loh...strong but not."

Strong but not? "My health has been a little fragile at times, I know." I think back to Rukhar's birth, when I was so sick I could barely stand. And then I think of my brain tumor, kept in check by my khui. Okay, maybe he's got reason to worry over me so much.

"Har-loh must stay near healer," he says in a low voice. "Always."

"Always?"

“I no lose you.” His big fingers trace my jaw. “So I live with noisy tribe. Because I live with Har-loh. I no live if no Har-loh.”

Tears brim in my eyes again. Damn it, I’m always weeping, aren’t I? I grab him and pull him against me in a fierce kiss, and I don’t even mind that our teeth clash a little. “I love you, too,” I whisper to him. “I don’t live without you, either.”

He says nothing, just holds me close. We lie in my furs for a while, just wrapped in the blankets and feeling together. I have to be more careful, I realize. Rukhar depends on his mommy, but Rukh can’t lose another person he loves so dearly. He’s lost so much in his life already and has been alone for so long.

That decides it. Harlow stays with the healer. Maybe it’s time to give up on my one-woman quest to restore the ship’s computer. Kinda moot now that the ship is on its side and looks like it’ll slide into the new gorge at any moment. But if Rukh can give up his dreams of peace and quiet because he worries over me, I can abandon the computer dream.

It’s something that can wait for another day, or another human. We live in the here and now, and I need to accept that. If the sa-khui are happy with bone spears and fur coverings, then who am I to force space heaters and stone-cutters on them? Not that those are operational anymore anyhow. I sigh.

It feels to me like being stranded all over again with the loss of the Elders’ Cave, but in the scheme of things, I suppose it is very small. We are all together. We are healthy. Nothing else matters.

A baby cries again, and my breasts respond. I pat my mate’s shoulder. “Want to go get our son so we can all three snuggle together?”

He nods and presses a kiss to my cheek. “You stay.”

“I’m not going anywhere, big guy,” I tell him softly.

And I mean it.

GEORGIE

“He’s awake?” I look in the direction of Pashov’s tent. People are streaming toward it, including his brothers and Farli. “Is he all right?”

“I don’t know,” Josie says. She puts her arms out to take Talie from me. “Farli was yipping about it as she ran over there. You want me to take over so you can go say hi?”

I give her a grateful look and hand her the long femur I’ve been using as a soup stirrer. We’re doing our best to make every bit of meat stretch, so that means soup for everyone—even the sa-khui, who aren’t big fans. One quill-beast can make enough soup to feed the entire tribe, though, so it’s a wise move. Plus, there’s fruit to be shared afterward. Rokan and Lila are back with more bags of fruit, and we’re carefully saving seeds and pits to replant, and drying the rest before it goes bad.

But I want to see Pashov, just like everyone else. So I hand her both stirrer and child. “Back in a flash.”

I head over to the tent and peek over the shoulders of Farli, who’s holding one of the door flaps open. Kemli and Borran are next to his bed, his mother gripping his hand and beaming with pleasure.

Across from them, on the other side of Pashov, is Stacy, who's wiping her eyes over and over again. She looks tired but relieved, and I'm so happy for her.

Pashov is thin—he hasn't eaten much in the days he's been unconscious, and his cheeks are hollow, his color a pale blue. He smiles at his parents and then at his sister. "I am fine, truly. My head hurts, but that is all."

Stacy sobs a little, and Pashov's brows go down, his smile fading a bit, as if her reaction confuses him.

"My son," Kemli says, squeezing his hand in hers again. "You must never scare me like that again. I have aged three hands of seasons every hour you slept."

He chuckles and then presses his free hand to his brow.

The tent goes still, everyone looking concerned. As I watch, Stacy trembles, her fingers pressing to her mouth.

"I am all right," Pashov says. He rubs his forehead and then gives us a rueful smile. "It is no more than a headache after drinking too much sah-sah. Do not worry over me. I shall be out and hunting again in no time."

"No," Kemli says firmly. "You will stay here in camp with your mate, and rest. Just because the healer fixed the worst of it does not mean you are completely healed."

But Pashov is frowning, his smile gone. "Did you say...mate?"

I hear Stacy suck in a breath.

Everyone is quiet. Pashov looks at his parents again, and then at Stacy, and I realize the confusion on his face is for her. Oh my god. He doesn't recognize her.

Kemli is the first one to speak. She nods. "You have a mate."

"Who?"

Stacy seems to flinch all over.

Kemli nods at Stacy. “She is your mate. Do you not remember?”

Pashov gazes at Stacy for a long moment, then shakes his head. “I...do not see anything. I have a mate?” His eyes widen in alarm. “Is...did I resonate?” He looks at the human in surprise. “To you?”

Stacy jolts to her feet. A broken sob escapes her, and then she pushes out of the tent, barreling into the snow.

Pashov tries to get up from his bed, worry on his face. Multiple sets of hands immediately pull him back down. “Rest,” Kemli orders him. “You must rest! Give her time.”

“But—” Pashov begins, casting a pained look after Stacy. “I...do not want to hurt her.”

“There is no way this cannot hurt,” Kemli says. Her face is worried, but she presses her hand firmly to her son’s shoulder. “But you must stay here and rest. You almost died, my son.”

“I shall get Maylak,” Farli says, casting me a worried look. She darts off.

I head out after Stacy, because how can I not? She’s one of mine, and she’s a close, dear friend. The person that should be supporting her and helping her through all of this *doesn’t even know she’s his mate*. I try to imagine how it would feel if Vektal lost all memory of me, and shudder.

Oh god, and he didn’t even remember his little son, Pacy.

I find Stacy sobbing, collapsed behind a nearby tent. Her fists are covered in snow, and as I watch, she slams one into the ground.

“Oh, Stacy.” I kneel next to her, putting my arms around her.

She flings herself into my arms, crying as if her heart would break. My own tears start, and I stroke her hair as she holds on to me, soaking the front of my tunic with her tears. “He d-doesn’t remember m-me,” she chokes out between sobs. “Or Pacy. The last two years

we've spent together? Our resonance? It doesn't exist to him." Her hands clench my leathers. "Georgie, *he doesn't remember me!*"

"It's temporary, Stacy. It has to be." I rub her back. "He suffered a terrible head injury. He was near death. These things take time." It seems like a shitty way for the universe to reward Stacy's unflagging devotion. She hasn't left her mate's side since the cave-in. Now he's awake and...still not quite whole. "I can't imagine what you're going through right now. Anything you need, you just let me know and we'll make it happen."

She sobs for a little longer and then looks up at me, her eyes puffy, the blue glow edged with red from her tears. "I need someplace to sleep."

"What?"

"I can't stay with him, Georgie. I'm a stranger. My baby's a stranger." Her words are bitter and her voice shakes. "I can't have him look at me...like he did earlier. Like it's a big blank. I'll die inside."

"You can stay with me tonight," I tell her firmly. "And as many other nights as you need. You know we'll take care of you."

"I wanted him to take care of me." She crumples against me, sobbing anew. "I wanted him to wake up and take my hand and let me know everything is going to be all right. And...he's not even my mate. Not anymore. How can we be mates if he doesn't remember anything?"

"It'll come back to him," I say fiercely, hugging her close and stroking her hair.

It has to, doesn't it?



HOURS LATER, Stacy's sobbed herself to sleep in a pallet of furs in mine and Vektal's tent. Pacy's curled up next to her, and now that Stacy's quiet, I can finally put Talie to bed. I snuggle her in the

blankets with me, imagining what it'd be like to lose home, security, and mate all at once.

I decide I'm the luckiest because I have my Vektal.

As if my thoughts summon him, he peers into the tent a moment later, his eyes a glowing question. He looks tired, but he also looks so handsome that my heart aches with all the love I have for him.

I put a finger to my lips and gesture at Stacy, then stroke Talie's hair as she sleeps.

He nods and removes his boots, then crawls into bed with me. Careful not to disturb Talie, he still manages to somehow pull me and her against his big, broad chest. Comforting us, the way Stacy longs to be comforted and can't have. Even if Pashov hugged her right now, it wouldn't be the same because he doesn't know her. She's a stranger to him.

My heart wrenches for her, and I suddenly feel like weeping all over again.

Vektal presses a kiss to my brow and whispers, "Is she well?"

"As well as can be expected." I look over, but she's not stirring despite our low conversation. Too exhausted. "It's been a real blow."

"He is upset, as well," my mate says. "He has hurt her and feels badly. He is confused, too. His memory has many gaps in it. Maylak says it is not something she can encourage his khui to fix. That it will take time."

"But the memory will come back?"

"She cannot say."

Oh, poor Stacy. Poor Pashov. I hold my mate and my kit, closing my eyes. "God. Please let him get his memory back."

He presses another kiss to my brow. "Is this the time that I tell you everything will be all right, my mate? As you did to me the other day, when I brought you my sorrows?" His big hand strokes Talie's curls,

and I melt at the sight of father and daughter, so peaceful. “You kept me going when I wanted to collapse. I will do the same for you now. It will all work out, my mate. Pashov will remember her...or he will not. But give them time to find their path. We can be a friend to both until they are ready to talk.”

I sigh. “You’re right. I just want to help her, to fix it. She’s suffered so much.”

“We are all suffering. Stacy knows this. She would not ask you to bear her burdens. Just like I would not ask you to take on all of the tribe’s suffering. We are in this together, my sweet resonance. We will find a home again soon. We will ride out the brutal season, and we will emerge as a stronger tribe. No...as a family.”

He’s right.

Things are hard right now, but they will get better. Already, things are looking up. We have the fruit cave. We have Pashov awake and mostly whole again. The runners will return with more supplies. We’ll figure something out. As long as we have hope and our tight-knit little community, we’ll be fine.

Stacy gives a hiccupping little sigh in her sleep, and I hurt for her.

If she can’t have hope, then I’ll have hope for her.

Everything will be all right in the end. We just need to take it one day, one hour at a time. And until then, we lean on each other and we hold tight.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

After the events of the last book, I just couldn't let the big 'earth-shake' go without showing a little more from additional points of view. I had a few nuggets of info in the last book (such as what happened to Rukh and Harlow) but because we only see things from very specific character viewpoints, it's hard to sometimes show them.

I really, really wasn't planning on doing another short story between books. I try to make them pleasant reads but non-vital ones, if that makes sense. I don't want readers to feel like they **MUST** read a story in-between the longer novels. I think of them more like fan-service. If you want to hang out with me a while longer, it's my thank-you to you for living and breathing in this world with me.

Sometimes, the stories don't let go, though. As the author, I had a hard time getting past the big shakeup. The more I sat and thought about it, the more I couldn't let this piece of story pass into barbarian history without a bit more clarity. I had to give Harlow and Rukh and Georgie and Vektal a little bit more screen time, if only to show just how 'big' of a change this was for our tribe.

So this isn't sweet and full of babies and sexy goodness. But I think that's all right, because it's full of family and hope, and sometimes those things are just as important.

For those of you wondering, I'm already at work on the next book. It should be October (barring any mishaps) and will be BARBARIAN'S HEART. If you follow my Facebook, you already know who it's about.
<3

Barbarian on!

Ruby

THE PEOPLE OF ICE PLANET BARBARIANS

As of the end of AFTERSHOCKS
(suggested pronunciations in parenthesis)

OKAY, SO THERE IS NO MORE TRIBAL CAVE. Sorry, little tribe! But for clarity and readability, we'll keep grouping our people like so until they find a new home.

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. MOTHER OF ESHA AND MAKASH.

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

ESHA (ESH-UH) – THEIR YOUNG DAUGHTER.

MAKASH (MUH-CASH) — THEIR NEWBORN SON.

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

CAVE 4

WARREK (WAR-EHK) – TRIBAL HUNTER AND TEACHER.

EKLAN (EHK-LAN) – HIS FATHER. ELDER. DEAD. SORRY, OLD GUY.

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) – THEIR INFANT SON.

CAVE 11

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

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

CAVE 12

ARIANA – HUMAN FEMALE. MATE TO ZOLAYA. MOTHER TO ANALAY.

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

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

CAVE 13

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

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

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) – SEPARATED FROM HEMALO. NO LIVING CHILD.

CAVE 19

BEK – (BEHK) – HUNTER.

HARREC (HAIR-EK) – HUNTER.

TAUSHEN (TOW –RHYMES WITH COW- SHEN) – HUNTER.

HEMALO (HEE-MAH-LO) – SEPARATED FROM ASHA.

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.

CAVE 21

ROKAN (ROW-CAN) – OLDEST SON TO SEVVAH AND OSHEN. BROTHER TO AEHAKO AND SESSAH. ADULT MALE HUNTER. NOW MATED TO LILA. HAS 'SIXTH' SENSE.

LILA – MADDIE'S SISTER. HEARING IMPAIRED. RESONATED TO ROKAN.

CURRENTLY CAVELESS BUT MATED

HASSEN (HASS-EN) – HUNTER. PREVIOUSLY EXILED. NEWLY MATED TO MADDIE.

MADDIE – LILA'S SISTER. FOUND IN SECOND CRASH. NEWLY MATED TO HASSEN.

BARBARIAN READING LIST

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[Barbarian’s Touch – Lila’s Story.](#)

[Calm - Maylak’s Story.](#) (short story)

[Barbarian’s Taming – Maddie’s story.](#)

Aftershocks - You just read it!

Barbarian’s Heart – Coming Next!

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Thanks for reading!

<3 Ruby

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