

A GIFT FOR DRENOL

RUBY DIXON

DRENOL

It is hard to be old in a tribe full of young ones. I watch the tribe move about the village, racing about as if they do not have hand after hand of years ahead of them. There are females everywhere, their kits darting back and forth across the cobbled stone walkways that make paths through the new village.

Bah. New village. I prefer the caves of my youth. They were much warmer than these little huts, and the worn, smooth floors were easier on the feet than the cobblestones. But times change, and tribes change. Hektar is no longer chief, but his son Vektal. And Vektal has a human mate, a pale, stringy-looking creature with no nose to speak of and a bushy, curly mane. She has a nice smile, at least, and has bred him two strong daughters and carries a third kit. He seems happy enough.

They all do, actually. Now more than ever, the tribe is full of happiness. It does not matter that it is the brutal season and the winds roar overhead, carrying blankets of thick snow to cover

the landscape. Here in this canyon, we are protected, and so everyone wanders about, smiling like fools. Even Haeden, who has always been reasonable and quiet in the past, has an idiot smile on his face as his little mate chatters and chatters, rubbing her rounded belly and they string up colorful seeds along the walls of their hut.

Jo-see. Bah. That one is determined to repopulate the entire tribe with her womb alone.

I snort, amused at my own joke.

Everywhere I look, I see families moving around the village. They dart from hut to hut, decorating with banners and boughs, seed chains and tiny basketed trees that Salukh's mate brought out from the long-house. The base of each tree is covered with a red-dyed leather covering to protect the roots, and the tree branches themselves are covered in strange ornaments. Each one has been placed in front of the entrance of a hut, and the kits are so excited at the sight of each one that they scream and laugh, racing around like crazed metlaks.

My bones ache just looking at them.

Drayan moves out of our hut and to my side, stretching. "They enjoy this No-Poison thing, the kits."

I grunt.

"I like that they decorate the huts," Drayan continues, oblivious to my surly mood. He crosses his arms over his chest, his snow-white braids stark against his skin. "You know who would have liked this?"

I stiffen, my eyes narrowing.

"Koloi."

"My mate would not have approved of this nonsense," I grumble at him. "She was sensible."

"She painted everything she could get her hands on, you old fool." Drayan just grins at me, as if bringing up my mate will make me pleasant. He should know better.

I just scowl at him. Some of us age cheerfully, like Drayan,

who greets every day with a smile and does not mind that he sometimes has to walk with a cane to support his weight. Some age into fools, like Vaza, who went to the other village with his female. And Vadren, who loses his wits a little more every day.

Me, I aged into an old, bitter hunter. My mate, my sweet Koloï, is long gone. There are no grown kits to look after, no family at my fire. Our son died not many turns after he was born and there was never another. Such is life. If it has made me unpleasant to be around, I care not. Fools like Drayan will always try to talk to me. Koloï's sister Kemli tries to include me when she gathers her family to her hearth, but she has all of her kits alive and grown, with families of their own. Even now, she is cooking a mountain of food for her son Zennek and his mate, and the mates of Pashov and Salukh. Her hearth is full of human females and their kits, and I do not want to spend my time there. I know if I stay here, she will bring me food and that is all I need.

Stupid No-Poison haul-day.

As if he can read my thoughts, Drayan gives my shoulder a thump. "Are you going to Kemli's fire this night?"

"Why?" I frown up at him. "So the humans can talk my horns off?"

"Jo-see will not be there," he teases, knowing my particular dislike for that one and her chattering mouth. "Stay-see and Teef-nee are not noisy like her. And Mar-len is amusing."

I just roll my eyes.

"You should spend the evening with them," he encourages. "I will be going to Meh-gann's fire. She is cooking for myself and Suh-mer and Warrek. It will be nice. And Vadren has been invited to Air-ee-yon-uh's fire since her mate is gone and she wants to cook for someone. If you do not want to go with Kemli's family, go and visit her?"

"No."

He gets a sly look on his face. "I bet if I tell Jo-see that you

are eating alone she will come and insist on you spending the evening at their fire. Humans love this haul-day.”

I glare at him and get to my feet. Or try to, but it’s a struggle. My old bones do not respond like they used to. I manage to get up, and then I straighten to my full height and glare at him. “I am going to Kemli’s, if only to shut you up.”

Drayan laughs, pleased. “You will enjoy yourself, friend.”

I somehow doubt that very much.

I ARRIVE at Kemli’s hut as late as possible. Even before I walk in, I can smell delicious scents...and I hear the murmur of voices. The hide she keeps over the door is pushed aside, welcoming any to walk in, and so I do and sit down by the fire immediately.

“Brother,” Kemli says warmly, smiling at me. She is still lovely despite her age, and I imagine my Koloï might have looked like her if she would have lived longer. It makes my heart ache, but I manage to nod at her. “I am glad you are here. Are you hungry?”

“No,” I say stubbornly. “I am only here because Drayan would not be quiet. I would rather be at home, where it is quiet.” And I glare at the kits playing on the floor nearby.

Kemli only rolls her eyes and tweaks one of my braids. “I will get you a cup of tea anyhow. The food is not quite ready yet, is it, Stay-see?”

“Soon,” the human woman says. That one is Pashov’s mate, her son holding a bowl for her as she ladles a sweet-smelling mixture onto her flat metal baking tray. Nearby, Teef-nee’s boy plays with Mar-len’s daughter, a set of carved bone figures in front of them. Mar-len holds Stay-see’s newest kit in her arms as she talks to her mate, and Teef-nee fiddles with something in her hands as she talks to Borran. It is crowded and hot in the hut, and I do not like it.

Kemli returns to my side and gives me a cup of tea. “Here, your favorite.”

“I do not know how I am supposed to drink it when I am already melting,” I tell her, scowling, but I take the tea anyhow.

She just pats my shoulder and moves back to the fire, stirring something before moving past Stay-see.

I notice Teef-nee’s son watching me, and I frown in his direction. My backside aches from sitting on this rock, and I can already tell this will be a long evening. I bite back a sigh of irritation when the boy gets up, a carved figure clutched in his hand, and comes to my side. His eyes are wide and curious. He has the same mane that his mother does, the wild, tight curls that spin out like a cloud around his head and horns, but his skin is the same shade as his father’s. He tilts his head at me, ignoring my scowl. “Do you want to play hunters with me and Zalene?”

And he holds out a carved figure to me. I take it from him, studying it. The carving is a *dvisti*. “Who did this?”

“Aehako.”

I grunt. “He needs practice. His animals are not very good.” I hand it back. “No, I do not want to play.”

Lukti’s mouth purses, unhappy. “Why are you mad?”

Am I to get no relief this day? “I am mad because I have to be here.” I gesture at the too-crowded room, where there is barely room to breathe. “It is crowded. It is noisy. People want to feed me when I just want to be left alone. And my backside hurts because these seats are uncomfortable.” I glare the last part at Kemli, who ignores me, a smile on her face.

“But it’s a holiday,” Lukti says, confused. “Everyone gets together with family on the holiday.”

“Bah. Haul-day.” I wave a hand in the air. “So you can put up ugly decorations? My mate could make a hut like this pretty. Koloï could paint better than any of these fools.”

Instead of being offended, he looks interested. "Koloi? I haven't met her. Is she visiting Icehome like Pacy's Papa?"

His innocent words cut deep. "No."

He gets even more excited. "Is there a story about her?"

I wave a hand irritably, trying to shoo him away. "Leave me alone. My bones ache."

"Will you tell me a story next time? I love hearing stories."

He is persistent, this one.

"I do not like you," I tell him, scowling. "Go away!"

Kemli is there a moment later, ushering the kit back to his mother. "Come, Lukti. Stay-see's cakes are almost done and you get the first one."

I grunt, pleased that she is taking him away. Far too many kits in this village, I decide. Far too many.

This haul-day cannot end quick enough.

LUKTI

After spending the evening at Nana Kemli's hut, me and Mommy walk back to our hut in the dark. I want to ask Mommy a bunch of questions, but she's real quiet, like she is when she's thinking about her spindle, so I'm quiet too. I know it makes her cry sometimes and I don't want to make her cry.

We go into our hut and our fire is nothing but coals, the inside chilly. "I'll make a fire, Mommy," I tell her.

"No, baby," she says absently. "It's bedtime. You know what that means."

It means that we do our No-Poison presents in the morning. I'm excited about that, but I know it won't be the same without Papa here. Mommy says he's being a good man and helping others that can't feed themselves and so we have to be strong, but sometimes I cry baby tears and wish he was home because I miss him. I think Mommy misses him, too. She's sad a lot of the time and so that's why she's always playing with her spin-

dle. She told me once that if she got it to work, it'd almost be worth Papa being gone.

I take my boots off and set them in their drying spot, and then change into my sleep-tunic with its soft fur and the long "cape" in the back that Mommy made so I can tuck my feet into it on colder nights. I get under the blankets and wait for my kiss and my lullaby, but Mommy doesn't come over right away. She looks distracted, toying with her spindle by the faint light of the coals. I watch her tease the clump of Chompy's hair on it over and over again, but she gets frustrated and tosses it aside...and then picks it up again, frowning at it.

Maybe she won't mind if I ask... "Mommy?"

"Yes, baby?"

"Can I play ball with Holvek in the morning? After we share No-Poison gifts?" Normally I play ball with Papa in the morning on No-Poison day, but Papa isn't here.

"Sure, baby."

"I have to play ball with Holvek because Raashel's gone with her mommy and papa to Icehome."

"Mmm." She fusses with the spindle.

"Raashel's my bestest friend, but she's gone, so I guess Holvek can be my bestest friend now. He's not as good with the ball."

"Maybe if you play with him more, he'll get better," Mommy says, glancing over at me.

Oh, that's a good idea. Pleased, I settle back in the blankets and think about Papa over at Icehome camp. I hope someone made him a good No-Poison dinner tonight like Nana Kemli made for us. Then I think about old Drenol and how mean he was. He didn't like my toys and scowled at us kids all through dinner.

"Mommy?"

"Hmm?"

“How come Drenol’s so mean? Nana Kemli always invites him to No-Poison dinner and he’s always mad at everyone.”

She moves over to my bed and sits down next to me, curling her legs under her. I sit up, because I love it when Mommy comes and hangs out in my bed. We sit together like we’re sharing secrets and it makes me feel so special. “Was he mean to you, baby?” She touches a tuft of my mane, toying with it. Her spindle is in her lap, forgotten.

“Not to me. But he was mean to Nana Kemli and she was trying to be nice.”

Mommy smiles, her teeth bright in the dark. “He’s sad, baby. He’s an old man and he doesn’t have anyone left.”

I scrunch my face up in a frown. Not have anyone left? But there are people everywhere, every day. “He has the tribe. He has all of us.”

“But it’s not the same. Remember when Raashel left and you were sad?” She squeezes my hand. “You’re going to play ball with Holvek tomorrow instead of Papa or Raashel. You still have the tribe, but it’s not the same, is it?”

It’s not. I miss Papa so much, and Holvek is a good friend, but Raashel was different. She was smart and funny and always saying interesting things. Holvek just likes to wrestle and get dirty.

Maybe Drenol is missing his bestest friends too.

I sniff and wipe my hand across my nose. Thinking about sad things makes me sad and my eyes water.

“Oh, don’t cry, baby. It’s okay.” Mommy’s fingers brush over my face, and I immediately feel better.

“I don’t like that Drenol doesn’t have his friends. Should I ask him to play ball in the morning instead of Holvek?”

Mommy laughs softly. “He might be too old for that, baby.”

“He did say his butt hurt when we were at Nana Kemli’s.”
Butts must hurt when you get old.

Mommy just touches my cheek. “No ball for him. But I bet

he'd like it if you'd go and talk to him for a while. Keep him company."

I wrinkle my nose. I don't want to spend more time with him. He didn't like my toys. "But he's mean, Mommy."

"Only because he's unhappy." She tweaks my ear. "Remember when Elly first got here?"

"She was smelly," I agree.

"Because she was scared and lonely. And she never talked to anyone, did she?" When I shake my head, Mommy continues. "It took time for her to be comfortable. Sometimes we do things when we're afraid because we're worried we're going to get hurt again. It takes time for us to relax and realize that people are nice just because they're nice. Give it time. I bet he could use a friend."

I think of Drenol. His face was covered in lines and his braids were snow white. Nana Kemli says that she has a gray hair for every story. Drenol must have *a lot* of stories...and I love stories.

"I'll try, Mommy."

She pulls me into her lap and cuddles me, and it's the best. Mommy cuddles make everything better.

MOMMY and I share presents in the morning for No-Poison, and then I go out and play ball with Holvek for a little while. He has a new tunic from his mommy and big, padded gloves that his mommy called *bahk-sing* gloves. They're so you can hit each other as a game and it won't hurt. It's fun for a little bit, but Holvek wants to keep playing after I'm tired. He runs off to find Talie because she's strong, and I go inside. Mommy's still playing with her spindle, twirling it like a top. Her expression is excited, like it's doing something cool, and I slip back out again so I don't bother her.

I think about what Mommy said last night.

Mommy was right. It was a good holiday, but it isn't the same because Papa and Raashel aren't here. Drenol must be missing his family and that's why he's sad. I decide I'll go and make friends.

I cross the village, sliding down the slippery path to one of the center huts, where all the elders live together. Drenol is sitting in front of his hut, scowling as Jo-see and Haeden and Joden wander around with baskets. They're bringing little treats to everyone, and they already came by Mommy's hut. Drenol looks mad.

I approach him cautiously. He's sitting on a big rock in front of the hut and shifts his butt every few seconds. It must still hurt.

"Hi Drenol," I say.

"Go away." He doesn't even look at me, just scowls at Jo-see and Haeden, who are a few huts down.

I ignore that, remembering what Mommy said about Elly. *These things take time.* "Don't be sad," I tell him. "They'll come to your hut soon."

"Bah," he says. "They are fools."

"Why?"

"Because we should be careful with food." He glares at me. "When I was your age, we only ate one meal a day in the brutal season, because we had to make sure it would last."

Oh. "Which meal?"

"What?" He squints.

"Which meal is it?" I sit down near him, curious. "My favorite meal is breakfast cuz Mommy makes me eggs. They're from dirtbeaks, but they're not dirty like the dirtbeaks are because of the shell, so they're safe. That's what Mommy says, but she still washes the shell over and over again just in case."

Drenol shakes his head. "When I was your age, we did not eat eggs. You steal the young from their mothers. That is a terrible thing."

“Really? Mommy says they’ll just lay new eggs. They don’t even notice.”

He leans in and glares at me. “Your mother is *wrong*.”

I blink, fighting back the urge to cry. He’s such a meanie.

Drenol shifts on his butt again, groaning, and then shakes his head. “Everyone in this tribe is foolish.” He looks over at Jo-see and Haeden, and then sees them coming towards us. Then, he waves at me quickly. “Give me your shoulder.”

I hop to my feet and move close, and he leans heavily on me, getting to his feet with a creak of bones. He sucks in his breath like I do when it hurts, and then shuffles into his hut.

I look over at the others heading this way. I think he’s hiding from them. Should I tell him Jo-see is too fat with kit to play hide-and-seek? I follow him into his hut.

His fire is really low and it’s cold and dark inside. As I watch, he shuffles over to his furs and throws one around his shoulders. He wouldn’t need to cover up so much if he took care of his fire, so I move toward it and spear a cake of fuel from the fuel basket, and then toss it onto the coals, stirring them to bring more heat just like Papa showed me.

As I do, I look around. I’ve never been inside the elders’ hut, and Drenol moves to a corner and lies down on his nest of furs, and in his area are baskets. Not just any baskets, but baskets with colors and patterns. He’s got an old dvisti skull that’s been colored all kinds of neat shades, too, with swirls and pretty designs on it. And in another basket...there’s all kinds of carvings of animals. They look like toys and I’m excited. The one on top looks just like a snow-cat. “Did Aehako make those for you?”

He gives me an irritable look. “I made those.”

“Did you paint, too?”

“No, my mate was the painter. Are you going to keep asking me questions?”

“Do you want me to make you some tea?” I ask, ignoring his

bad mood like Mommy said. She must be right, his butt must hurt him a lot.

“No.”

I move toward the basket of carvings, because they look so neat. “These are really good.”

“I know.”

“The paintings are pretty, too. Did you paint them?”

“My mate did,” he says proudly. “She would paint and I would carve by the fire at night.”

“I like your carvings,” I tell him, feeling shy. “Mommy is good at all kinds of things, but I’m too little to do carving myself.”

“Bah. I was your age when I learned.”

“Wow, then you’ve been doing this for a really, really long time.”

He glares at me. “Are you saying I am old?”

“You’re not?”

Drenol just sighs and shakes his head. “Kits.”

I can’t help but stare at the basket full of carvings. There’s so many of them, and they’re all tiny and lifelike. I see one that looks just like a metlak holding a baby on its back and my fingers itch to touch it. “You made these to play with?” I touch one hesitantly.

“No. I made them for my son, but he died.”

“That’s sad.” I pull back, not wanting to touch them if it bothers him, but they’re so good. “Can you show me how to carve like this?”

He’s quiet, and I look over at him again. He’s sitting up in bed. His expression is weird, like he can’t decide if he’s sad or angry.

Then he shakes his head. “Go away. My backside aches.”

Drenol lies down and puts his back to me.

I leave, but my head is full of thinkings. I don’t think he wanted to lie down so early or stay in his hut when it’s so nice

outside, but his butt hurts him. I think of the pretty painted things in his hut, and the carvings. Drenol likes special things. And I think of how much he talked even though he acted like he didn't want to.

Mommy's right. He's just sad and lonely. I didn't see any No-Poison gifts either. I bet he didn't get any because his mate and son are gone.

Someone should make him a gift. Everyone deserves something for No-Poison.

I race back home. "Mommy! Mommy!"

She's rolling her spindle against her leg, excitement on her face. "Look, Lukti! It's making yarn! I figured it out! I can make yarn and then we can make real fabric!"

"Okay," I say, trying to be excited for her. I move to her side and touch her other knee. "Mommy, I need you to help me make a present for Drenol cuz he doesn't have anyone."

She holds her spindle for a second, then puts it aside and pulls me into her lap, squeezing me into a great big hug. "You're a sweetheart, you know that, baby?"

I just giggle, because I'm ticklish. "Does that mean you'll help me?"

"Of course. What do you want to do?"

DRENOL

I nap for most of the day, because there is nothing else to do when you are old and your bones hurt. Vadren and Drayan are staying with the others as the festivities continue, so I am here alone.

That suits me fine. I need no company. It is quieter without the nattering of others. I can hear my own thoughts. I can sleep.

Again, I guess.

The fire is close to dying once more, but I do not have the energy to get up and stir the coals, not when it is just me here in the hut. It grows dark outside and I can hear distant laughter as others continue to feast and celebrate, but hearing that just makes me tired. My Koloi would have liked all the gift-giving, I think.

Someone scratches politely at the entrance to my hut, even though the screen is ajar.

“What?” I call, irritated. “I am not walking over there just because you are too shy to come in.”

“It’s me,” calls a young voice. The boy from earlier. Lukti.

My heart aches. There is something about his eager gaze that reminds me of my young son, gone all these turns ago. Seeing him is painful. “What do you want?”

“I brought you a gift.”

Eh? I sit up, curious. “A gift?”

The small head peeks around the corner and then Lukti comes into my hut. He carries one of the things humans call a “pillow,” and it is nearly as big as he is, the stuffing thick. It is trimmed with white fur on the edges and is so large it makes him waddle, and outside I see his dark-skinned mother smiling with approval as he comes inside.

“Why do you think I need that?” I ask, struggling to get to my feet.

“It’s for your butt,” he calls out cheerfully. “So you don’t hurt when you sit on your rock outside.”

“We even made a strap,” his mother adds. “So you can put it over your arm and take it with you around the village.”

Lukti stands there, holding the pillow and smiling at me uncertainly. Angry words rush to my tongue, but then I pause, because in each corner of the pillow, I can see where he has sewn a decorative stitch in bright red—and the swirling design is one that Koloï painted all over the skull that sits next to my bed.

Clever, thoughtful boy.

“Well,” I say, managing to straighten to my full height. “Let us try it out, then.”

Excited, Lukti skips out to the front of the hut and I follow behind, much slower. His mother waits a short distance away, her arms crossed under her teats as she watches, a little smile on her face.

I move to my sitting rock and ease my weight down on the puffy thing. To my surprise, my tailbone is cradled perfectly and does not shoot fire up my back. “Well,” I say again. “Your mother is very thoughtful.”

“Oh no,” she says. “This was all Lukti. I just helped.”

I look down at the small, eager boy and nod slowly. “Then I thank you.”

He beams at me, happiness wreathing his face and my chest aches. I reach out and pat his shoulder, and he comes and sits next to me on the big rock. “Mama says I can hang out with you if you want, and we’re gonna have snow-cat stew at our hut if you want to come over for dinner later. She says no one else is gonna be there, just us, and your pillow will fit on a sitting rock there, too.” The words rush out of him, as if he is afraid I will scowl him into silence before he finishes.

“Only if you want to,” Teef-nee calls out. “No pressure.”

“That is...very kind of you.” I shift my weight on the pillow. Very comfortable. The thoughtfulness of this small kit is astonishing. “I thought I would stay here, but...”

“Stay here and carve animals?” Lukti asks, his voice full of excitement.

I was going to sleep since there is nothing else to do, but I do not tell him that. “You like the carvings that much?”

“Oh yes.” His eyes shine with enthusiasm.

I gesture inside the hut. “Bring the basket and the leather wrap next to it that holds my tools.” I nod at his waiting mother. “I will bring him home before dinner.”

She winks at me and then strolls away as Lukti dashes into the hut.

The boy returns a moment later, his arms full of the basket of carvings and my tools. I point at the wrap. “Unroll that on the ground and I will show you what each tool is for. A good carver needs many different ones. See that big carving on top? Of the skyclaw?”

Lukti immediately grabs it and holds it up.

“You can have that one.” I am rather proud of it, because the folded wings turned out well.

His eyes widen and he clutches it to his chest. “Really?”

“Really,” I say, and then gesture that he should sit down in front of me. “But if you really want to learn, I can teach you...” And I am oddly pleased when he thumps to the ground in front of me, all eagerness and attention. “All right, then. See that first stick there? With the hard edge? That is your pick...”

THE END