

**TWAS THE NIGHT
BEFORE NO-POISON DAY**

AN ICEHOME HOLIDAY SHORT

RUBY DIXON

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LAUREN

Christmas fever has hit the Icehome camp, hard.

It all started when Raven - darn Raven - made a musical instrument of shells and broken bits of metal that sounded a bit like sleigh bells. It immediately made her launch into 'Jingle Bell Rock' and she sang it all day long. Normally I don't mind Raven's singing, but this particular song caught the attention of the kids.

"Is it No-Poison time, Mommy?" Ever-quiet Rukhar had asked his mother by the fire that night.

Both Aayla and Raashel lit up. "No-Poison! No-Poison!!"

"I would enjoy a few games of foots-and-ball," Sessah added, his expression boyish and hopeful.

Liz shrugged and looked at Harlow, who also shrugged. "It IS the brutal season. Might not be a bad idea."

"What is No-Poison?" O'jek asked, curious. "I have not heard of this."

That started things.

It's been a week now since that conversation, and the

entire camp is in full swing. The holiday fever has hit everyone and plans have been changed on a daily basis. Were you supposed to go hunting today? You can't, because you have to make No-Poison gifts for your mate. Gonna take a trip to the fruit cave for a few days? No, you're not, because No-Poison's about to be here and everyone is excited for the celebration.

Well, except me. I'm a little cranky because I'm the one that was supposed to go to the fruit cave with K'thar. Just a week or so to warm up and eat delicious, juicy fruits, and then we'd come back. Except now that No-Poison is hitting soon, that plan's been temporarily shelved. K'thar's as excited as everyone else about No-Poison, so it's not like I can complain.

The fruit cave will always be there.

Maybe I wouldn't be so grumpy about it if I had an idea of what to give my mate for his gift. K'thar's been hard at work on mine, hiding things in our tent and casting furtive looks in my direction from time to time. He's full of secret smiles, and each one fills me with joy...and a bit of despair because I don't know what to get him. I've never been good at giving gifts. I was the first one to hand out gift cards on a holiday, and now I don't even have that option. It's not that I don't like holidays; I do. I just love warmth and fruit more right now. It might be the pregnancy hormones talking, but I can't think of a single thing to get K'thar that would be special. I'd have to make something, but my skills are not that great. I'm good with people, not a needle, so I've thought and thought and thought...and I've got nothing.

This morning, though, it's No-Poison Eve (is that a thing? I guess it is) and so I'm using those people skills to try and steal ideas. That's right, I'm desperate. I lurk around the fire, waiting for someone who looks as if they're working on something, and pounce.

Maybe I have an unhinged look in my eyes, or maybe no

one wants to talk to a hormonal pregnant lady first thing in the morning, but everyone blows me off.

“Me and Flor are going to go shrimping,” Sam says when I approach them.

“I’m just coming out to grab a cup of tea before I get back to sewing,” Bridget says, and makes a hasty exit.

“Z’hren has diarrhea,” Gail says as she passes through camp with her son, heading toward Veronica’s tent.

Okay, so that one kinda scared me off, but no one lingers to chitchat. I give up on the fire and head down to the beach, where I see a few people walking. Devi’s there with N’dek, doing their usual rounds of critter-cutting, but I don’t approach. They’re not doing anything holiday-ish from the look of it, and I’m not sure my early-morning pregnancy stomach can handle an impromptu dissection. A bit further down the beach, I spot Gren. He’s scanning the shores, little Aayla holding his hand tightly and Raashel walking in front of them.

Is he babysitting? Present making? Either way, he’s my next target.

“Hey there!” I call out brightly. “What are you guys up to?”

Gren gives me an odd look. Aayla just clutches his hand and Raashel wrinkles her nose at me. “Why are you talking so loud?”

“Am I?” Shit. I try to be less anxious and crazy-eyed and more chill. “You guys working on No-Poison gifts?”

“No, because Santa brings those,” Raashel tells me, scoffing with all the confidence of a pint-sized Liz.

“Right. I forgot. So what are you guys up to?”

“Mama is hanging out with Harlow and Hannah and Veronica, and Gren says Willa’s tummy doesn’t feel good, so we’re looking for the island nuts to see if any of those floated up.”

Island nuts? The ones with the peanut butter-type stuff

inside them? We haven't seen one in weeks, but I don't point that out. An island nut would be an awesome gift for K'thar, who sometimes comments on how different the food is here. It'd be a taste of home for him. "Any luck?"

Gren shrugs those big, furry shoulders and lets Aayla tug him further down the beach. "Fishies!" the little one cries, pointing at the waves.

"Willa doesn't want a fish, does she, Gren?" Raashel calls after them, following behind.

The big guy patiently offers Raashel his other hand and leads them down the beach. I don't hear his answer, just the sound of Aayla crying "Fishies!" over and over again, and pointing at everything she sees.

Okay, it's clear that they're hunting for those nuts for Willa's gift...either that, or he's just babysitting. But the nuts are a good idea. I head up and down the shore, watching the waves intently, and telling myself that if I see a cluster of them, I'll share with Gren and the others. I just want one good one for my K'thar. I imagine his bright, delighted smile, and how he'll share with Kki, who shivers and huddles against his neck at all times, practically a permanent fixture under his hair. The nightflyer doesn't like the cold much and has turned into a mega-snuggler.

Which is nice...unless you're trying to get intimate with your mate.

I walk up and down the beach twice before I give up on the island nuts idea. If there are any to be found, they're not making their presence known this morning. I need a new idea. I pass by a group of the men - Shadowed Cat, Strong Arm and the clones - listening intently to Taushen as he explains the rules to a bastardized version of football. Or soccer. Or something. It sounds like it involves hitting or crashing horns, which makes the men grin with enthusiasm. I pass by the rows of wooden huts that are tucked along the cliff, and at the far end, I

see Bek hard at work on the hut he's making for Elly. She sits nearby, bundled up in furs, her eyes full of pleasure as her mate settles the pieces of wood together for the floor. Vaza helps — well, sort of. Mostly he's standing nearby and telling stories while Bek does all the work, but they all seem happy enough. Seeing Vaza with them reminds me that Gail went to Veronica's tent.

And Gren said that Liz is with Harlow and Hannah? Hmm. That sounds like a gift-making group to me. Hopeful, I head in that direction.

I hear the laughter coming out of Veronica's oversized tent before I even get to the doorway. "He fainted at the sight of his own blood," I can hear Brooke saying. "And poor Kate had to carry *him* off the glacier!"

Howls of laughter meet this pronouncement.

I scratch at the hanging leather 'door'. "Knock knock, can I come in?"

Liz appears in the doorway, glancing around, and then pulls me inside like it's top secret spy stuff. "Don't let the girls see you. Gren's keeping them busy."

The anterior room in Veronica's tent is normally reserved for people coming to visit the healer. Most days, it's neatly organized with baskets full of herbs and roots, and there's a 'bed' for patients. Today, though, the place is a mess. Liz, Harlow, Brooke and Willa sit with Veronica, Gail and Hannah. There are piles of things in front of each of them, and as I watch, Liz returns to her seat, skewers a few small pieces of dried fruit on a small stick, and passes it to Harlow, who wraps it in leather and adds it to the stack of bundles at her side.

"What are you guys doing?" I ask, sinking down to sit next to Hannah.

"Christmas presents," Veronica whispers. "Rukhar and the girls are supposed to be surprised."

"Along with half the camp," Gail adds, rocking an oversized

Z'hren as he sleeps in her arms. She pats the baby on his back. "Luckily this one is young enough that he can sit here with me and still be surprised tomorrow morning."

"It's my fault," Hannah admits, adding dried leaves to pouch after pouch for what's probably a tea blend. "I was watching the kits with J'shel and telling all of them about Christmas stockings and how Santa would fill them, and the next thing I knew, there was a boot outside our hut." She grimaces. "I didn't have the heart to tell him Santa wasn't real. I'm pretty sure he knows, but now he thinks it's our custom to fill shoes with presents and the kits think that, too, so here we are." She gestures at the spread. "Making gifts for everyone's stockings."

"Boots," Brooke corrects, chuckling. "Every hut I've passed has a boot outside it now, so word has spread. So we're making a little something for everyone so no one is disappointed."

"Thanks, loudmouth," Liz says sarcastically to Hannah.

"Oh," I say as Veronica strings bits of shell onto a bracelet. She stabs herself with the needle, grimaces, and then looks up to see if anyone noticed. "We've had a boot at our doorstep, too, but I thought K'thar was just airing them out."

"Nope," Liz says. "They're waiting for presents."

"Is there something I can help with?"

"I think we've got it?" Harlow says, gesturing at the group. "We've got dried fruit skewers going, the hraku-seed cookies are made, the tea bags are almost done, and there's just the bracelets for the girls left."

"Coming along great," Veronica promises, and promptly stabs her finger again.

I study the others, thinking. "What are you getting your mates? For the holiday? I need ideas for K'thar."

Liz shrugs. "Harlow, Gail and I are switching off with Angie on babysitting. We're all going to take a different day and just have a day of peace and quiet with the occasional interruption for breast-feeding. I'm not sure if that's helpful."

It's not. I'm pregnant, but Liz and Harlow both have multiple children. A day 'off' is probably more exciting to them than it is to me. K'thar would just be bored. "You, Brooke?"

She grins wickedly. "I've been playing with hair colors and I'm going to dye one of Taushen's braids. He loves my pink hair, especially now that I've re-pinked it." She fluffs her locks, and while they're not the same shade of pink as before, it's pretty close. She also smelled like the worst sort of dead fish for two days after thanks to the dye, so I'm not sure that's something K'thar would be interested in, either.

"Veronica?"

She just blushes. "Um. Stuff. Private dragon stuff."

"Buttsex," Hannah whispers loudly.

Everyone erupts into laughter again, and Veronica turns redder. Z'hren jerks in his sleep, then settles back against his mother.

"Did you talk to my mate?" Gail teases. "Because he's been suggesting all kinds of nasty things to me for his gift. I told him we do that shit on the regular, so there's no need to wait for a holiday."

Annnnd now I've learned too much. Though their tent is pretty close to ours, so it's not really a surprise. More of a just 'so that's what that noise is' answer to a question I never, ever asked. "Uh, Hannah?"

She smiles sweetly. "I've been working on new gloves for J'shel in secret for a few weeks now. Callie showed me how to do a few decorative stitches and I even made a matching hair tie for his braid."

"That sounds awesome." Hannah's so thoughtful. She's been preparing for weeks? I feel like the worst mate in the entire tribe. I know K'thar could probably use some new gloves, but he's got four arms. I literally don't even have time to make two decent gloves, much less four. And he doesn't have a magnificent braid quite like J'shel does.

This is so not helpful.

“What about you?” Harlow asks me. “What are you giving K’thar?”

“That’s just it. I have no idea.” I try not to whine. Try, and probably fail. “I’m sure I’ll think of something.”

“You will,” Veronica says confidently.

“And if you don’t, everyone’s going to get their boot filled by Santa,” Hannah says. “So no one’s left out.”

I smile at her, but I don’t feel better. A boot gift is for everyone. I need to do something that’s just for K’thar. Just from me.

And I have no flipping clue as to what.



I hang out with them for a little longer, but when it’s clear I’m just in the way and distracting them from their assembly line, I take off. I look around the camp for Mari, but I don’t see her anywhere. My shy, sweet friend will know what I should give him, I think. Mari’s thoughtful. She always wants to help everyone, and I desperately need help. Another brain to pick is always useful, and I just like talking to Mari.

Okay, so I like whining to her. And I feel like whining right now. I never thought I’d feel so inadequate over gift giving, but here I am.

Mari’s not in the tech cave, though. She’s not in the tent she shares with T’chai — the one with two beds because they’re having trouble figuring things out. She’s not walking on the beach. It takes me a while to find her, but when I do, I find both Mari and Sessah sitting together at the far end of the cliffs. Her hand is on the lanky man’s shoulder and she gives him a sympathetic pat as I approach.

It takes them a moment to notice me. My boots crunch on the sand, and Sessah’s head jerks up. He turns, a look of hope on his face, and it dies the moment he realizes it’s me. As I

watch, his shoulders slump in defeat once more, and Mari bites her lip.

Uh oh. "Is this a bad time?" I hesitate. "I can go."

Sessah gets to his feet, a furry bundle in his arms. "I am leaving. Perhaps I will see if they need another for the foot-on-balls game."

Mari winces but says nothing as he leaves, and as I pass by him, he seems...utterly dejected. Less full of energy than usual. Sessah's the youngest of all the warriors here, an adult, but without the years of experience and life some of the others have under their belts, which makes him seem that much younger sometimes. Like...right now. He looks like a kicked puppy.

I sit down next to Mari and watch as Sessah leaves. He doesn't head for the ball game, but instead heads to his tent and disappears inside. "What's that all about?" I ask her.

Mari gives a little sigh. "Heartbreak."

"Uh oh. What'd I miss?"

Her eyes are kind and full of understanding. "Just a little Christmas snag. Sessah's spent days and days making Tia a cloak out of some really nice furs he's been holding for her."

That must have been the bundle in his arms. A cloak. Hmm. I wonder if I can make one for K'thar.

"Someone told I'rec about it, though, and he gifted Tia a cloak this morning. She's been wearing it all day. He beat Sessah to the punch." She shakes her head. "I know all is fair in love and war, but that's cruel."

Poor Sessah. I know everyone thinks he and Tia are destined to be together because they're the closest in age, but Tia seems to have other ideas. She loves to flirt with Shadow Cat clan, and the more attention she gets, the better. This is unfortunate for Sessah, because he's utterly smitten with her. My heart squeezes in sympathy for him and I feel like an ass for even considering making K'thar a cloak. His gift idea was

already stolen once. I don't want to be the jerk that steals it again. "Young love is hard."

"He needs to resonate. Once he does, he'll get over her. His obsession will switch to someone else." The smile she gives me is thin. "Look at you. You and K'thar are happy as two bugs in a rug."

I grab her hands. "Which is why you have to help me think up a gift. I'm running out of time to make something."

She laughs. "A gift?"

"Yeah. I'm totally open to stealing your idea, too. What are you giving T'chai?"

Her expression gets sad. "I...nothing. I didn't think about it. Me and T'chai...it's difficult. Giving him a gift would give him hope for something I'm not sure I can give anymore."

Just like that, my anxious bubble deflates. I squeeze her hands tighter. "Oh, Mari. I'm the biggest ass in the world, aren't I? I'm sorry. I'm so thoughtless—"

"It's fine. I promise." She gives me another shy smile. "It's just another day, you know? I'm sure if you don't give him something, he won't mind."

"I'll mind, though." I've been obsessing all week. Each time I've caught him furtively working on my presents just makes me feel worse, too. "And I know he's giving me something, so I have to give something back. I have to make it good."

"Lauren," Mari says with a shake of her head. "It's just a holiday. It's not about the gifts, okay? It's about spending time with those you love. You know the saying -- it's the thought that counts."

"Tell that to my mate when I give him a 'thought' tomorrow morning," I grumble. "It's just...he's so wonderful, you know? I want to show him how much he means to me. I'm just not good with gift giving. I overthink everything and then I get paralyzed."

“I don’t think he’d want that,” Mari laughs. “I think he just wants you to be happy.”

“I am happy.”

“Then enjoy it.” She gives my hands a return squeeze. “Enjoy every blissful, resonating day and don’t worry so much.”



I still worry, though. I smile as the tribe gets together around the fire for dinner, and Raven breaks into more Christmas carols. It turns into a sing-along from the humans, and Raahosh and Rukh produce a full-length sashrem tree and the kits decorate it as we watch, and Harlow cooks up the not-potato root of it for what she calls ‘sa-khui latkes’, which are tradition with the other tribe. The tree is sad and pink and floppy, so the decorations slide off the branches, and it makes me think that they must have traveled into the mountains to get it and bring it back, because no trees like that grow around here.

It’s just another thoughtful, wonderful way the people here adapt to what they have and make it their own.

K’tar pulls me into his lap as we sit by the fire, nuzzling my jaw. “You are quiet, my pretty mate.”

I smile at him. “Just thinking.” I slide my arm around his neck...and immediately upset a nestling Kki, who squawks indignantly at me for touching him. “Whoops.”

“He is cold,” K’tar says, grinning. “This place is always cold and he has no mate to warm him, so he must settle for me.”

“Poor thing, having to settle for you,” I tease. “I know what that’s like.”

He mock-growls and nips at my jaw again, one of his many arms sliding around my waist. He’s distracted, at least, and so I’m saved from having to answer him. The No-Poison celebration goes on around us, everyone laughing and having a good

time. Everyone except Sessah, that is. I notice him sullenly hovering at the edge of camp, a hangdog expression on his face as he watches Tia. Several of the women are working on chains of colored seeds for the children to hang, and I notice Tia sits at the edges, flirting with both U'dron and I'rec as she strings seeds. She's wearing a white fur cloak over her shoulders, thick and puffy and cloud-like.

It is a nice cloak. Poor Sessah.

When it seems like every song has been sung and the food is gone and the kits in bed, K'thar and I head back to our tent. I see the boot waiting at the doorway, and my stomach sinks a little, because I still don't know what to get my wonderful, perfect mate that conveys just how much I love him. We go inside, and K'thar stokes the fire, then straightens. He raises one hand over my head, and I see a handful of dried leaves dangling over my hair.

"What the heck is that?"

"It is not poison," he tells me helpfully. "And now I shall be awarded with kisses, yes?"

I can't stop laughing, because the corrupted version of holiday traditions are funny and sweet at the same time. I fling my arms around his waist and tilt my head up for his kiss. "If you wanted to make out, all you had to do was ask."

He grins down at me. "I wish to give you traditions, my L'ren. No-Poison is important to your people and so it is important to me." He leans in and lightly kisses my mouth, so tender it takes my breath away. "I have made you a gift—"

"Tomorrow," I blurt. "Let's exchange in the morning. That's part of tradition."

"Very well." He strokes my cheek with one knuckle. "What else do you do on this night, then?"

"Allow me to show you," I say, and take one of his hands in mine and lead him to our furs.



It's a long time before we go to sleep. K'thar kisses every inch of me, in 'proper' No-Poison style, and we make love by the fire-light. We make love almost every night as it is, but tonight feels special, and I'm overwhelmed with how much I adore him and how happy I am.

There's just no way to channel all that into a pair of ugly leather socks.

I climb out of bed to stir the fire, and K'thar turns over. Immediately, Kki takes my place in the furs, huddling against K'thar's thick fall of hair and digging his claws into it. The little flyer is on him like a tick with the colder weather, constantly trying to squeeze his way into K'thar's clothing and hide from the wind and—

Oh.

I know what to make for my mate.

Excited, I grab my sewing basket from the corner and set to work as quietly as I can.



It's practically dawn before I'm done. I cut the final threads and knot them in a decorative style, and then rub my itchy, hurting eyes. I've squinted by the fire all night long but I'm pleased with the changes I've made to K'thar's favorite tunic.

"L'ren?" K'thar mumbles sleepily as he sits up, rubbing his face. "You are up already?"

"I haven't slept yet," I tell him, fighting back a yawn. Seeing him tired is making me tired. "I was working on your present."

That wakes him up. "You made me something?" There's boyish joy in his face. "I made you something, too."

I hope mine's sufficient. I squelch back a worried thought and hold the tunic out to him. "Here."

He takes it from me, and I can tell he's confused, because it's his favorite tunic, one he wears regularly. "It is...very nice."

I fight back a laugh and go join him in the blankets, crossing my legs underneath me. "No no, look at the front. I made some changes to it."

K'thar studies the neckline, and realization dawns on his face. "You made a hood."

"No, it's not a hood. It's a carrier. Sorta. It's a reverse hood. See, it's in front." I hold it up to his chest and show him where it'll lay. "It's lined with extra fur and some stuffing on the inside to make it super warm. You can wear it in the front of your tunic, or inside the neck and share warmth with Kki on the days it's really cold out. It's not much, but..." I shrug. "I...thought of you."

It sounds lame now that I say it aloud. All I did was sew a hood into the front of his tunic. It's nothing amazing.

But he touches it reverently, then pulls his tunic on over his head. Gone are the decorative ties, and in their place is the loose, thick puff of 'hood' that I made for Kki. He calls to the little flyer, and then tucks him into the new pocket, and slips the entire thing into the neck. It rests against his collarbone, warm and fuzzy, and his smile of pure delight fills me with pleasure. "Can you hear him warbling? He is happy."

"I hope you're happy, too."

He leans in and kisses me fiercely. "I have the best mate."

I beam at him. I know Kki constantly is cold. The flyer doesn't have the thick fur that the native creatures do, and he's constantly burrowing into K'thar's clothing and tearing holes into stitches or getting in the way. With the adjustments I made, the fur hood acts a bit like a scarf and a pocket at the same time, and it's the best of both worlds. "Happy No-Poison to the best mate a girl could ever have. I love you so much."

K'thar kisses me again, his camouflage flashing with a rare

display of emotion. Then, he touches my cheek. “Now it is time for your gift.”

He hands the small, leather-wrapped bundle to me and I peel back the leather carefully, revealing two shining, delicate pearly spirals. “Oh,” I breathe. “What are they?”

“They are carved from shell,” he tells me. “You twine them in your mane to keep it out of your eyes. My mother used to wear her mane like that, sometimes.” And he takes one and twists it into a handful of my hair, holding it back. “You are lovely, so I wanted you to have something equally lovely.”

There’s a knot in my throat. “Oh, K’thar. Thank you. You’re so thoughtful.” I touch my hair, wishing I had a mirror. “I love you.”

“And I you.” He kisses me...and then looks over at the entrance to our tent. “Did...”

I laugh, touching my shell-spirals, pleased with the gift. “Go and check.”

“My boot,” he cries as he looks out the flap of our door. “It is full of gifts! S’nta did visit.”

No-Poison might be my new favorite holiday.



The End — Thank you for being a fan. <3

