

Cinnamon

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“Morning, Sam.”

“Morning, Ralph.”

It was a perfect day, like every other for the past five years. Seventy degrees Fahrenheit, low humidity, and with just enough puffy little clouds in the sky to keep it interesting under the dome. The two men hauled their golf clubs onto the back of a driverless cart that had pulled up to the clubhouse in front of them.

“I’m surprised you’re not hung over,” said Sam as they took their seats.

“I was,” said Ralph as the cart accelerated towards the first hole. “But I guess I was entertaining enough last night to earn the hangover remedy.”

“Yeah, I figured you would,” said Sam. “You usually do. So which of those three hotties did you end up with?”

“What do you mean ‘which’?” replied Ralph with a big, stupid grin.

“It’s obvious why the Moukes seem to like you so much,” chuckled Sam. “Lucky bastard. For that, I get to tee off first. Not all of us earn our keep by fucking well.”

“Hey, bro, not everyone can golf like you, or has the brains to go flying off to the colonies like your brother and sister,” said Ralph. “I just do what I do best—and it’s not my fault the Moukes like to watch. You know what they say: ‘Curiosity thrills the cat.’”

“It’s ‘killed’, not ‘thrills.’”

“Whatever,” said Ralph, grabbing his crotch. “Penis.”

Sam laughed. Ralph wasn’t the brightest or most talented person he’d ever met, but he *was* entertaining. In many ways he was the brother Sam never had. Sure, he loved his actual siblings a ton, but they weren’t nearly as much fun at parties. And unlike his siblings, Ralph never went out of his way to make him feel stupid. *In fact*, thought Sam, *compared to Ralph, I’m like that Einstein guy.*

“Well, right now the Moukes are more interested in watching my club than your pecker,” said Sam. “Gimmie some room, or it might be your noggin that goes flying instead of the ball.”

Sam’s club head emitted a crisp *pak!* as it connected with the ball, sending it soaring in a perfect arc above the fairway. After three graceful bounces, it rolled to a stop within an easy lob of the flag.

“Go ahead and match that,” said Sam, stepping aside grandly for his friend.

“Yeah, right,” said Ralph. “Luckily I don’t have to, so long as my dick doesn’t fall off.”

After anyone else, Ralph’s tee shot would have been respectable. But it’d take him at least one extra stroke to reach Sam’s ball. As they motored ahead, neither man took much notice of the spectators’ heads hovering just above the tree canopy on either side of the fairway. Over the years they’d become used to the crowd that gathered to watch them play, just as they’d grown accustomed to knowing that their every action was viewable 24/7. But one set of ears caught Ralph’s eye as he stepped out of the cart to line up his shot.

“Isn’t that your favorite Mouke? The one that gave you the Porsche?” asked Ralph. Sam followed Ralph’s gaze and spotted the distinct orange and black markings of his greatest patron.

“Among other things,” said Sam. “It’s actually the one who put me in the villa.”

“No shit,” said Ralph. “I thought you lived in that palace before the Moukes came. I mean, you were a pro golfer, right?”

“Sure,” said Sam, handing Ralph a 5-iron. “But had you heard of me before we met at that New Era Eve party three years ago?”

“Nope. When I first saw you I thought you were a musician or something.”

“You weren’t too far off: with the exception of one lucky year, I didn’t make much more than those guys that used to play guitar in the subway,” said Sam.

“I wonder what happened to all them,” said Ralph as he squared up to the ball. “I mean, is the subway even still there?”

“Dunno,” said Sam. “But everyone must have ended up *somewhere*. Though I’m pretty sure that the guy who sings ‘I’m Going to Space’ and ‘Parties Are, Like, Real Fun’ started out that way.” At one point Sam had actually asked his patron how

many humans were still on Earth, but he couldn't remember the answer. "I'm sorry...go ahead with your shot. And remember not to drop your front shoulder."

"Thanks," said Ralph, adjusting his torso before striking the ball.

"Not too shabby," said Sam. "But it's still your shot."

As they carted towards the green, the big fuzzy head with orange-black markings tracked along with them. Sam glanced towards the cat-like giant, wondering why it chose this day to watch him play—and what gift it had for him. Not that it mattered; nothing made him happier than playing golf, and anything else, no matter how pleasant, was just a distraction. Sam and Ralph watched a rocket trace a bright line across the sky in front of them, bound for who knows what corner of the galaxy.

"That reminds me: have you heard anything from your brother?" asked Ralph.

"Naw," said Sam. "But they told me I probably wouldn't, because of how far away his new planet is or something. That text message I got six months ago was the last thing, when he said that his colony was real glad to have another doctor." When his brother had left, the Moukes explained to him exactly why it was that communications didn't work well across great distances, just like they had when his sister was sent to the Outer Reaches in the first year. Both times, his eyes had glazed over when they started to use terms like "frequency spectrum," "wave functions," and "light years." Which, of course, the Moukes found utterly adorable, resulting in Sam being scooped up into its arms and then gently stroked from head to toe, its soft paw-like hand delivering a sensation not unlike a full-body massage. Sam smiled as he recalled its deep, rumbling purr, and the scent of cinnamon and toasted hazelnuts.

"What do the Moukes smell like to you?" Sam asked as he handed Ralph a pitching wedge.

"They all smell kinda different," said Ralph. "But there's always a little garlic in there...I LOVE garlic. Yeah, those Moukes are alright."

"Huh," said Sam, who'd never detected garlic on any Mouke, even the ones that had pet both he and Ralph. For Sam it was always cinnamon, which was by far his favorite scent. When he asked his patron why the Moukes smelled so good, it gave him an answer, but all Sam remembered from their chat was that it told him not to worry about that sort of thing in the future, and that he should just focus on golf and having fun. Which suited him just fine, he supposed.

Ralph swung and overshot the green by a few yards. "Pisscrackers!" he shouted. The ears of the half-dozen Moukes looking down on the green twitched

back and fourth, which both men had learned meant they were laughing (or, more accurately, Sam had figured it out, and later told Ralph.) Ralph gave an exaggerated bow. Sam looked towards his patron, who stood apart from the rest. Its ears were not twitching.

“I think I’m still away,” said Ralph. “Though you can go ahead and hit, since we’re closer to your ball.”

“That’s okay,” said Sam. “We’re in no hurry. And the Moukes like it when you play strictly by the book.”

“If you say so,” said Ralph as he headed to the far side of the green. Sam watched another rocket take to the skies, a gigantic cargo carrier resembling a flaming whale, and thought about how grateful he was that the Moukes had come to Earth.

Sam had never cared much about the news. In the years before the Moukes arrived he’d been dimly aware that the usual minor wars were threatening to grow into bigger ones. And of course taxes were way too high. And that was about it. But even a no-fuss guy like Sam got a bit panicked when the meteors started to hit. Just small ones at first, landing harmlessly in the ocean or in open stretches of Russia.

But then they started coming every month, sometimes hitting near populated areas. Tens of thousands died. After one struck close to Washington, D.C., the toll climbed to over a million. Then Beijing. Then London. Plus more than a dozen smaller cities, along with hundreds that landed in the seas and wildernesses, clouding up the atmosphere with dust and vapor.

Sam remembered the stunned look on the vidcasters’ faces as they reported that a new wave of meteors was heading their way. Many parts of the world descended into chaos. For Sam and his extended family, it meant retreating to their vacation home in Gatlinburg, where they prayed that their world would hang together, or if it didn’t, that they’d be carried to salvation.

That’s when the Moukes appeared in their ships, blasting every inbound meteor to smithereens as Earth’s camera-equipped telescopes watched. Of course they were greeted like heroes.

“Top that!” said Ralph, beaming. Sam shook out of his memories and saw that his friend’s ball was within six inches of the cup.

“Nice,” said Sam. “Though I’d be more impressed if I wasn’t still three shots ahead.”

“Maybe,” said Ralph. “But how’s that old saying go? ‘It ain’t over ‘til fat people are singing’?”

“Something like that,” chuckled Sam as he grabbed his lob wedge.

“Well, then, how about we make a little bet?” said Ralph, grinning.

“What did you have in mind?”

“If I get it in the hole before you, I get your Porsche,” said Ralph, louder than necessary. Sam smiled at his friend. *He might not be so great at remembering facts and numbers* thought Sam, *but he sure knows how to put on a show for the Moukes.*

“And what if I win?” asked Sam, playing along. “And it better be good, because the odds are real heavy in your favor.”

“Now, I don’t know about that,” said Ralph. “But you’ll like it. Remember those three you saw me with last night?”

“Of course.”

“I’ll set you up with them,” said Ralph, clapping Sam on the shoulder. “In fact, I already talked to them about it last night.”

“Aw, come on, man!” said Sam. All of the Moukes were watching them intently, their ears canted forward. “How do I know you weren’t going to hook me up with them anyway?”

“Would you just give me your Porsche for no reason?”

“I see your point,” said Sam, who then made a big show of mulling it over. “Okay, it’s a bet.”

Sam walked to his ball, club in hand. Apart from the now two-dozen Moukes gathered around the green, he knew there were probably tens of thousands more watching from elsewhere on the planet, plus who knows how many humans. But moments like this were what Sam lived for, and were what set him apart. For whatever reason, he found he could simply tell his nervous system not to feel the pressure that would make most other people shake or vomit.

Sam looked down at his ball, and then walked to the green to examine its contours. As he walked he noticed his patron in the front row of spectators. Sam had only a limited grasp of the mammoth extra-terrestrials’ range of expressions, but he was pretty sure it was showing pride. Sam smiled up at it, but it looked away, probably because it didn’t want to be a distraction.

In truth, having it watching *was* distracting. Not because of any added pressure, but because of how much he was looking forward to being pet by it. While

it wasn't uncommon for a Mouke to randomly reach down to give a human a friendly pat or quick rubbing, there was nothing like having their full attention. Moukes knew exactly where and how to touch you to put you in a perfect state of contentment. *Not erotic* thought Sam *just perfect serenity*.

Of course not everyone liked being handled by the Moukes. Sam recalled that his sister downright despised it, and didn't seem too crazy about the Moukes in general. So she was thrilled when they said that because of her engineering skills, they wanted her to help establish a new all-human colony in the Outer Reaches. It seemed that the earthquakes that had begun in the wake of the meteor strikes were getting worse, and everyone agreed that it would increase humanity's long-term chances of survival to move chunks of the population off-planet, at least until the Moukes had it all fixed up.

Although Sam was sad to see his sister go, he resented that she and the other folks like her got to travel to space (though he minded less that most of the big politicians went, too.) Over the next few years, many more colonies were announced, with more and more people heading for the transport centers to rocket off on their new adventures.

Sam's adventure, like everyone else that remained, was to be relocated into a gigantic domed biome. It was pleasant, and he liked the Moukes, but sometimes Sam felt like he was missing out. Even though there were no communications with the new colonies, every now and then a short video would come out showing the progress being made on one planet or another, full of smiling busy people constructing buildings and roads on planets that looked surprisingly similar to Earth. He always looked for his brother and sister, though he knew the chances of seeing them were slim. But with the exception of missing his siblings, as he walked back to his ball he had a hard time imagining how he could be happier.

"Quit stalling, bro," heckled Ralph. "I'm in a hurry to drive home in my sweet new car!"

Sam ignored the comment and got into his stance over his ball. Glancing up towards the green he again spotted his patron, and the scent of cinnamon came to mind. Instantly, the world slowed down. His body relaxed. Ralph and the Moukes disappeared behind an opaque veil. The ball at his feet was his to command, and the hole on the green was wide as a lagoon. He lifted the club back in one smooth motion, savoring the feeling when it reached the precise point between backward and forward momentum. The downward stroke accelerated as strongly and surely as a freight train.

Even before the club head struck the ball, Sam knew he'd succeeded. Everyone did. The ball flew in a perfect arc, touched down ten yards from the hole, bounced over Ralph's ball, and landed in the cup with a satisfying *plik!*

Cheering erupted in both Sam and Ralph's heads. It still seemed weird to Sam that the Moukes didn't talk or make other noises out loud, choosing instead to transmit their "voices" directly into people's minds when necessary. He'd asked his patron about it several times, but it never wanted to discuss it. It was only the week before that he'd finally gotten the nerve up to ask a different Mouke, a shorter one with yellow and green markings that had recently taken an interest in him. But Sam found he couldn't remember any part of the conversation. All he remembered was that it didn't smell quite as good as his patron.

"I'll be damned," said Ralph as the cheering subsided. "I guess I know what you'll be doing tonight."

"I guess so," said Sam, patting Ralph on the back. "But one thing at a time—we still have seventeen holes to go."

The rest of the round went by pleasantly, if never matching the drama of the first hole. But there were no fewer Moukes in attendance at the eighteenth, after the trouncing of Ralph was complete, including Sam's patron.

"I'll catch up with you later," Sam called to his friend as he made his way off the green, waving to the appreciative crowd of Moukes towering around him as he went.

"I'm sure you will," said Ralph with a wink.

Sam approached his patron, neck straining as he looked skyward at it. To his surprise, it didn't scoop him up right away. *You put on a fine performance today* it said. In his mind, his patron's voice was decidedly female, though Sam knew that the Moukes didn't have genders the same way humans did. It was one of the first things he'd asked it about.

"Thanks," said Sam, squinting upward in a failed attempt to see its face. "I always seem to do well when you're standing nearby."

You flatter me said the Mouke. *But I'm afraid I have some news that may upset you.*

Sam's first thought was that his brother or sister had died in some kind of accident, but a gentle non-verbal surge told him that it was something else. "Did I do something bad? Was it the bet?"

No it said, ears twitching with laughter. *We were all quite entertained by your wager, and impressed by your victory. But I'm sorry to say that you won't be able to collect your prize.*

Sam's stomach knotted. More nonverbal surges told him that his perfect world was about to disappear. "Please...just tell me."

It's actually...very exciting it began, though Sam detected no trace of that particular sentiment in its thoughts or manner. *The bad news is that the ground under this dome is not as stable as we'd thought. It's been decided that all of its inhabitants must be relocated.*

"That's pretty bad," said Sam, who tried to remember the last time he'd felt a tremor there. No matter; the Moukes had always been right about these things before. "Which dome will I go to? Does it have a nice golf course? Can I bring my Porsche?" Sam felt the mental equivalent of a smile wash over him.

You always have so many questions! said Sam's patron, then a long pause. Sam sensed a complex tangle of thoughts and emotions coming from it, all of which flashed by too quickly for him to even attempt to decode. The smell of cinnamon wafting from his patron surged. *Let's start with the big picture: because you're my friend, you're not only going to get to relocate first, but you've also been selected to settle on New Carolina.*

"My sister's colony?" said Sam, feeling a lift of hope.

Correct. With our help, the first wave of colonists was able to get New Carolina in shape more quickly than anticipated. We've also decided to relocate your brother and the rest of your family there as well.

"I can't believe it!" said Sam, who now felt foolish for worrying that he'd no longer live in his palatial home, or drive his Porsche, or have his foursome. Then another thought occurred to him. "What about Ralph? And will you be coming, too?"

There was a long pause before his patron answered. *Yes, Ralph will be joining you there soon. But I'm afraid that I will not. The colonies are for you humans, not Moukes. And I'm still needed here to help fix your home planet. I hope you understand.*

"Sure, I guess," said Sam. Little of what the Moukes did made sense to him, and as much as he liked to pepper his patron with questions, he'd always done well by just accepting what they said. All of humanity had. "I'll miss you."

Sam found himself lifted high into the air, and then held close against his patron's shaggy chest. The scents of cinnamon, sage, and maple syrup swarmed his senses. A soft hand smoothed his head, ran down across his shoulders, down the length of his body, and back again. Sam swam in the feeling. His patron held him tight, its deep rumbling purr coming raggedly, unlike any other time he remembered.

"Are you okay?" asked Sam. A long pause.

Yes, Sam it said. I wish I could tell you everything...It's...complicated...I'm sorry...you've been very special to me... another dense thicket of emotions flashed by, then a slow-moving wave of euphoria washed over Sam. He imagined himself standing on the peak of an impossibly tall mountain, with an infinite view in all directions at once. When he came to his senses he was standing back on the ground, though a muted feeling of euphoria remained. His patron towered above him, now flanked by two taller Moukes with dull patchwork fur.

I can't say any more, Sam said his patron. But I'll think of you every day. And I'll know that you're in a better place, with all of your family and friends. Goodbye, Sam.

Sam's patron turned and headed away. The two motely-looking Moukes gave him a mental prod indicating that he should head towards the Human Space Port, a special facility next to the Mouke port that Sam had only ever seen from the outside. A pang of uncertainty reached him through the euphoria.

"Do we have to go right away?" asked Sam, even as his legs began moving. "I'd like to say goodbye to a couple of people, and maybe pack a few things, like my golf clubs."

You won't need any of your things where you're going said one of the Moukes, ears twitching slightly. The smells of cinnamon, mulch, and burnt bread saturated Sam's senses. *And you'll get to see all of your friends real soon.* Now both Moukes' ears were twitching fast. Sam laughed, too, though he didn't quite know why. It just felt like he should go along with them.

And so he did.