

Hutch thrust the leash towards him and Shibani took it before he could think it through. The leather felt smooth in his hand, if slightly sweaty from how desperately Hutch had clung to it. He studied his newly assigned imp, humming thoughtfully.

“I’ve never seen this type of imp before.”

Hutch readjusted their glasses, using the heel of their hand to push them up, “I’m not surprised, this species is very rare! They’re called lunells. Wild lunells appear only once a month,” they held up one finger and had to quickly snatch up a dropped leash, “on the night when the luminosity is at its lowest. Aren’t they beautiful? The crescent on their heads is one of the lunells’ most unique features. I haven’t had the chance to do many *in-depth* studies, but I do believe it serves the function of helping them to maintain their balance while floating. Since they tend towards being extremely docile and quiet, they do make good pets when properly trained, but no matter their temperament they inevitably get agitated whenever their undomesticated peers take their monthly constitucionals...”

Shibani nodded along. He only understood half of whatever Hutch was saying when they were in imp mode but it did sound interesting, even if he hadn’t really meant to set them off. That last bit seemed strange though... He cut in before Hutch could continue their lecture on lunells, forewarned by them taking a deep breath, so he could ask a question:

“Isn’t it almost at its peak though? The monthly cycle I mean, it’s always *really* bright during the Mochi Moon.”

Hutch grimaced and shuffled their feet, “yes, that’s... them being in such a state right now, logically it shouldn’t be the case. Like I mentioned before, Mochi Moon is an exception. Admittedly, I did lose track of time and that’s why I didn’t think to secure them beforehand. You’re a lifesaver really. Under normal circumstances I’d be able to handle them alone, but I’ve never had this many lunells at once before due to their scarcity. I actually received an anonymous request a few days ago to prepare a large batch of lunells for new owners... I wonder if they were tricking me, knowing that this would happen?”

“Um, maybe. What if the lunells are just excited for the party like everyone else?”

“I don’t think so, lunells aren’t *tuned into* the emotional atmosphere that way. It’s part of what would make them so suitable as a therapy imp—they won’t be pulled into anyone’s pace. Whether you’re anxious or stressed, a lunell could be your rock. If only succubuns would realise that there’s a place in our society for imps; that imps could improve their lives instead of complicating them...”

“Yep,” Shibani said succinctly, “but Hutch, where are the crates?”

“Oh, yes, follow me please.”

They began heading towards the back together. Hutch precariously lowered the handle with their elbow and Shibani waited patiently as they negotiated the door frame with their gaggle of imps. Hutch preferred to let the imps free roam as much as possible, hence their current predicament, but they still needed to be crated from time to time. It tended to be reserved for sleep—Hutch’s sleep that is, since the imps didn’t need to rest. Besides that, they weren’t confined unless an imp needed to be isolated for some reason.

Since that was the case, it seemed that the other residents of the Imporium had already been put to bed for the night. The click of Hutch’s heels on the tiles as they walked down the corridor prompted the occasional caw or cry from the shadowed silhouettes of wide open doorways. At the very end of the passageway was the room wherein the lunells were currently being kept. Shibani pushed ahead of Hutch so he could open the door and avoid a repeat of the previous hold-up.

As he idled inside the room, Shibani looked up at his lunell again. While it did strain against its leash, it wasn’t very strong. The sensation was comparable to keeping ahold of a balloon in a light breeze. Even with a dozen of them, resisting their pull shouldn’t have been an issue. The primary cause behind Hutch’s haphazard handling appeared to be their overburdening, in addition to the imps tangling the lines. Hutch let out a long exhale when they finally entered, before looking around intently. Small sacks of sesame seeds were lined up against the wall and Hutch trotted over. They gestured for Shibani to come by making thrusting motions with their chin. Shibani suppressed an involuntary snigger and waved both hands in apology. The lunell squeaked as it was dragged along by its leash. Hutch shook their head.

“Okay, um, so, we need to free up my hands. What I need you to do is weigh down your leash with one of the bags of sesame seeds and then take another from me. We’ll keep repeating that, and then eventually I’ll have a hand to help out too.”

It seemed as good a plan as any—*well*, Shibani didn’t have anything better in mind anyway. He crouched and after a bit of micromanaging from Hutch on how to exactly lay the leash they had one down and eleven to go. It was time-consuming, but they did end up with results. Thirty-odd minutes later, they had all the imps pinned down. Shibani tipped backwards from where he was kneeling onto his behind, whining about needing to sit for a bit. Hutch nodded, hand on their chin as they mused: “that’s fine, I can take it from here. In fact, I should probably be the one handling it... it can get a little tricky...”

Shibani observed Hutch, curious about the expert imp handling techniques that he wouldn’t have been able to replicate. The techniques turned out to be baby talking and kissing the lunells good night. The transfer began with a firm grip on its crescent—“don’t worry, it doesn’t hurt them!”—while the collar was unbuckled. Once freed, the opposite hand came in to loosely clasp the imp by its “neck” and it was carried from the wall to the rows of crates. The cage door had been left ajar from this morning, and Hutch extended their entire arm into its interior to release the imp as far back as possible. Most lunells would try to make a break for it instinctively, but Hutch would block its path to coo at it. Without fail, they would reach inside to cradle its cheeks

between two hands and kiss its forehead before letting it go. No lunells made an escape attempt after that. Shibani watched them repeat roughly the same routine a dozen times, mesmerised.

Hutch, satisfied with their work, turned and blinked to find Shibani sitting there. They seemed to have completely forgotten his presence some time between lunell four and five. “I, um, Shibani, you came for a reason, right? Black sesame seeds? Feel free to take a sack or two. I’m sorry to take up so much of your time when you’re busy with Mochi Moon preparation, ah, oh no.”

Shibani pushed himself up off the floor, tail out straight to help him balance. He smiled easily at Hutch, “you’re fine, I only have one more stop after this.” He slung his bag from his back to the floor. He shuffled the matcha aside before depositing the sack that had held down “his” lunell next to it. Sesame seeds secured, he donned his bag again and followed Hutch out of the back—and then out of the store itself. Hutch thanked him wholeheartedly for his help before fleeing back inside, waving from behind the glass as they locked the outer door. They’d likely ran out of socialising juice for the day. Still stiff from the floor, Shibani stretched all five of his limbs—arms and tail out and standing on his tippy-toes. That had been an unforeseen hassle. Anyone else might’ve needed a drink after such an ordeal, but Shibani needed to visit Hops for a different reason altogether. Strawberries on his mind, he began trekking in the direction of the Rabbit Hole.