

**Chapter 1:**  
**Morah 34<sup>th</sup>, Grada**  
**Year 10,053 AE**  
**(The Nigelle-Beesa House; Kokako Boaka)**

Stars woke with a jolt; her eyes flying open as her breath caught in her throat and her entire body tensed so tight it ached.

She'd had another bad dream.

A terrible one.

One that made her feel cold.

Cold, cold cold. So very cold. Cold right down to her bones.

Ka'harja gave a groan and sat up; the back of his shirt patched with dark and damp marks from Stars' sweat.

They'd been sharing a bed (or, more accurately, three small beds pushed together) since the beginning of Jasfe, when they'd first moved into their new home. Laying back-to-back in the cramped space while their mothers shared the other remaining bed on the opposite side of the room. And now it was well over a month later and nearing the end of Morah, and all that had changed was that Ka'harja and Stars had switched who slept next to the wall.

Ka'harja always took the wall side, now; Stars had originally preferred it, feeling safe and snug pressed between her friend and the cool plaster. But every night her Little Demon cried and she would have to get up to feed and change him. And she would have to crawl over poor Ka'harja, who would wake up to a hand or knee or elbow jabbing into some part of him or another as Stars lost her balance and landed on him.

He insisted he didn't mind, but it still made Stars feel guilty every time he stumbled out of bed and hit his head on the downstairs doorway while heading to the bathroom.

This time, though, Stars hadn't woken to her son's crying; it had been a terrible dream that had pulled her from sleep.

A terrible, terrible dream.

She had been back in Heck'ne; cornered in her old sleeping hovel as Lah'kort's living corpse hissed and screeched and clawed at the baby in her arms like a ga'oa crawler come to steal her most precious treasure away. Blood oozed from his nose and eyes and throat, as it had during his death, and his body contorted in unnatural ways.

She'd cried for help; screaming until her throat was hoarse. But nobody had heard her as her child was ripped from her arms and consumed alive by the creature that resembled her father.

A gentle hand touched Stars' shoulder as she lay frozen on her side, her eyes locked on her baby's cot as her body trembled in the shock of what she'd seen in her dream, and she knew just from the way his finger's brushed against her that Ka'harja had seen it too.

He had been walking in all of her dreams, every night they lay together. Witnessing them as if they were his own.

It had been strange, at first, to hear him describe her own thoughts to her as if they had been his. She hadn't fully understood what was happening until she had discovered the town's library and out of curiosity (and perhaps some luck) decided to read about the Eight Star symbol that Distro had hung on the wall above her bed.

It made perfect sense after that; Ka'harja was clearly a dream master. Blessed by the deity Jornja to be able to reach into other's minds while they slept in order to witness their dreams and manipulate their thoughts.

He denied it, though. No matter how much proof Stars showed him or how many books she brought home to read to him; he refused to believe he was magical.

It was all very silly, Stars thought....

Then again, Ka'harja was a very silly person. At least sometimes.

Not right now, though. Right now he wasn't being silly at all. He was being very, very kind to her.

A tear rolled down Stars' cheek, and she felt herself snuffle as Ka'harja wiped it away with the back of his thumb.

He said nothing. Though, somehow, his silent presence was enough to comfort her and she felt her breathing even and her body relax.

She finally broke her eyes away from her baby, glancing up at Ka'harja for a moment as he gazed down at her... and then she rolled out of bed; her feet hitting the floor with a quiet *thump* as she stumbled to the cot and checked on her son.

She resisted the urge to yank him from his bed and hold him close. She'd learnt that waking him when he slept was bad for him, and though she desperately wanted to hug him and feel his heartbeat and *know* that he was okay, she knew she couldn't.

So, instead, she simply stood over him and trembled; one of her four thin arms shakily finding its way under his nose to check his breathing.

It was even. And Stars felt her shoulders fall slack as he squeaked out a noise and twitched.

*Was he dreaming, too?* she wondered. *He looked like he was dreaming. But it was hard to tell.*

Finally, Stars managed to speak.

'Can berr dream?' she asked.

'I think so,' Ka'harja replied. 'They're people, right? And most people dream. I don't see why being a baby would mean you couldn't.'

Stars flicked an ear in acknowledgement, and softly stroked her hand over her Little Demon's cheek.

She hoped that he would have good dreams. She'd tried to make his life too good for nightmares to find their way to him. But his first few days of life had been such scary ones, she just couldn't be sure that he wouldn't remember all of the blood and death and violence and pain.

So she kissed him. Leaning in close and carefully pressing her lips to his forehead.

He stirred. A quiet, disturbed babble escaped him as he shifted but didn't wake and Stars quickly stepped back from his cot; her ears flicking up as she wrapped all of her arms around herself and waited for him to settle again.

'It's still so hard to believe he wasn't born dead,' she admitted, hearing the sorrow

in her own voice. 'All my other babies were born dead.'

'I know,' Ka'harja comforted.

'I don't want to lose him,' Stars felt tears welling in her eye.

'I know.'

'I kosson him.'

'I know.'

'I kosson him more than I have ever loved anyone before in my entire life.'

'I know.'

'I'm scared, Ka'harja. Dr Lakeki said that he might not ever walk,' Stars shivered at the thought. 'His legs don't work properly. If we were still in Heck'ne, they would have killed him for that.'

'I know.'

'I don't want him to be killed.'

'He won't be,' Ka'harja's arm found its way around Stars, and an exhausted kiss pressed against her cheek. 'It's illegal to kill babies, here.'

'Good. It should be illegal everywhere!'

Ka'harja scoffed a laugh, and Stars stamped a foot.

'*It wasn't a joke!*' she muttered, frowning as deeply as she could so Ka'harja would know how serious she was being. '*Don't laugh at me!*'

'I'm sorry,' Ka'harja's hand slipped from around her, and he made his way back to the bed to sit down. 'I agree though. Killing babies *should* be illegal everywhere.'

'Eewowm for saying you're sorry,' Stars mumbled her thanks. She still wasn't used to it; being apologised to. Back in Heck'ne, even when she was right, her mother had been the only person who would ever apologise to her. The others... she couldn't recall a single time that any of the warriors had ever said they were sorry to her. 'I'm sorry I got angry. I know you're not trying to be mean when you laugh at me. But it makes me feel bad when you do, because everyone always laughs at me.'

Ka'harja flicked his ear in acknowledgement, though he looked too tired to say anything as he rubbed his eyes and wiped his nose on the back of his hand.

'I wish Coff didn't have to leave,' the thought left her mouth as it came to her mind, and she felt her shoulders drop as she flopped onto the bed next to her friend. 'He was mip with my Little Demon.'

A sigh escaped Ka'harja and Stars knew he felt the same— Though she knew it was for a very different reason. He loved Coff. Loved him as more than a friend. Coff was his boyfriend; a person that he loved so much he had *chosen* to be his partner.

The idea of being able to choose a partner because of love was still so strange to Stars. And, before she could stop herself, her brain had made a connection that her mouth said aloud, 'I miss Fabecut.'

Ka'harja just shrugged.

'I thought things would get easier once we got to town,' Stars admitted. 'Everyone said that it would be more mip. But... it's harder. Much more mup.'

'I think we just need to make some friends,' said Ka'harja. 'It's been... almost two months, now. And we've spent most of it in the house—'

'You have,' Stars corrected. '*I* go out every day!'

A chuckle escaped Ka'harja, though he smothered it and side-eyed Stars. 'Sorry.'

She decided not to get mad at him for laughing, this time, because he had tried not to. Instead, she kicked out her foot and examined her toes from a distance. 'I liked living in the caravan. It felt like a big family. I could talk to any of them and know that they wouldn't get mad at me.'

'It was easier to know who to talk to, *that's* for sure,' Ka'harja agreed, looking like he was thinking *very* hard about how to say his thoughts out loud. 'It's.... Sometimes it's harder to find someone to talk to when there's more people. It's weird to think of it that way, but.... When there's more people you see everyone a little bit less. So when there's too many people, they all seem like strangers.'

'That makes sense,' Stars felt the corners of her mouth turn in a smile. She was glad Ka'harja understood how she was feeling. It made her feel better.

A blubber from Little Demon sounded, then, and Stars' ears twitched.

'Sounds like he's awake,' Ka'harja gave a sniff and flopped onto his back. 'Wish I wasn't.'

'You can go back to sleep,' Stars told him as she rose to her feet and picked up her son. She held him in her lower arms, and let him grab at her hair as she pecked several kisses into his face.

'You'll be alright if I do?'

'Yi.'

Ka'harja rolled over and, before Stars had even managed to pull up her shirt to feed Little Demon, began snoring.

Stars fed her son in the quiet dark; appreciating how the dim blue from the soulstone-lit streetlights illuminated the room through the open window. She brushed her fingers through his thin black hair and felt him grabbing at her own; his four tiny hands holding onto her weakly as she hugged him close.

He was getting stronger, but he still wasn't strong enough. The doctor Coff had found for him was proud of his progress, saying that he had improved a lot in such a short amount of time... but, still, when Dr Lakeki spoke of Little Demon's progress, Stars could still see the worry in her eyes. She could still see that there was more wrong with her baby. That there were things that they might never fix— Things that could hurt him. It terrified her.

She wished, beyond all wishes, that she could do more for her Little Demon.

That was when Little Demon unlatched from her breast and gave a babble, and Stars pulled him away from her chest. She looked down at him for a moment, gazing into his pale green eyes as he flicked his ears back and forth as if only just realising he had them. Then, he smiled at her and lifted his arms, grabbing at her and squealing in joy, and she couldn't help but giggle as she pulled him up over his shoulder and pet his back.

He burped, though Stars didn't let him go. She held him close against her shoulder as he took a hold of her own ear and tugged on it. So she flicked it; feeling it pull out of his hand, before moving it back for him to grab again. He let out another happy squeal-like laugh so she did it again, and again, and again; unable to contain her own laughter as she did.

She tried not to laugh too loud; her family was sleeping, after all! But she couldn't

help herself as she felt her son's lips close over the end of her ear and she quickly moved herself downstairs.

She lay on the floor, on the old rug Distro had brought home (she hadn't said where from, but Stars thought she could recall seeing it next to a dumpster while on one of her walks), and placed her Little Demon on her chest. She tried to sit him up —Dr Lakeki said that a baby his age *should* be able to balance enough to sit up!— but instead he flopped limply forward with a confused grunt and mumble, and Stars had to peck a kiss on him and coo to stop him from becoming upset.

*'I'm sorry,'* Stars whispered into her son's cheek. *'I'm sorry. You're not hurt. Na miita. Na miita, my taa'han berr. I'm sorry.... Shh.... Shh.... Mia. Mia, my berr.'*

As if he understood the comforting words, Little Demon stopped his unhappy babbles and instead wrapped a hand around his mother's ear again.

She smiled, a small giggle escaping her, and Demon gave a happy gurgle in response and grabbed her hair with all three of his free hands and tugged.

It didn't hurt; his grip was far too weak for it to be painful and instead Stars' hair simply slipped between his fingers as he blubbered and squealed.

*'Kosson, my kama berr,'* Stars told him, shifting him into a sitting position; though this time, she kept her lower hands holding him so he didn't fall. *'My beautiful Little Demon. I love you. I do! Yi! I love you more than anything else in the whole world! Yi, I do! More than anything! Even more than grass and flowers and sunlight!'*

Little Demon gave a squeal as his mother poked his nose with a free hand, obviously overjoyed by the interaction.

Stars knew, reasonably, that he didn't understand what she was saying. Her own mother had told her that babies didn't understand things like that until they were older... but still. Stars hoped he *understood* her. If not what her words meant, than what her words *meant*.

She thought that he might have, from the way he grabbed at her hand and nuzzled it; her fingers making their way inside his mouth as he giggled and grabbed at her with all of his arms.

He lifted his wings (something that made Stars' heart skip a beat, as just a month ago he hadn't been able to do so) and gave a loud squeal of joy as he bounced and tried to stuff his mother's entire hand down his throat.

Stars pulled her fingers back, matching her child's laughter as she lowered him down to peck a kiss on his cheek.

*'You are so important,'* Stars whispered in his ear, eliciting a happy gurgle. *'You are the most important thing I have ever known. You changed everything. I don't know what I'd do without you; so you have to get stronger, yi? You have to be the strongest you can be. You have to live.... Yi tai, na zi'kaf. You must kami kiita, so I can be taa'han.'*

*'Stars, honey? You doing alright?'*

The familiar voice spoke from the foot of the stairs, and Stars twitched her ears and peered over her son's head as Ka'harja's mother, Distro, stepped to her side and poked her with a foot.

*'Yi yi, Kekik Distro,'* Stars replied as the woman grinned down at her. *'I'm enjoying*

some time with my Little Demon. I didn't want to wake you or Kekik, so I came downstairs with him. Because he can be loud, and I know my kekik is a light sleeper. Not like you, Kekik Distro. You're a very heavy sleeper.'

'Heh, always have been. You should have seen my poor father trying to wake me for my tutors,' Distro said with a humoured snort. Then she twitched an ear towards the door. 'I'm heading out to beat the morning rush to the market. You want to come? We can swing by Lakeki's clinic after for Demon's appointment, if you'd like?'

Stars considered it seriously for a long, long moment, then she flicked an ear in an unsure gesture. 'Ka'harja was going to take me. Would it be rude to go out without telling him?'

'I'll leave him a note,' Distro suggested. 'He'll see it when he wakes up, then.'

'Oh! That is a good idea, Kekik Distro!' Stars exclaimed, taking her baby in her lower arms so she could push herself upright with her upper ones. 'Then he will know where I went, and he won't be looking for me or worried about being late! Mip mip, Kekik Distro! You're very smart!'

Distro gave a deep, chesty laugh as she took a pen and paper from the worn-down shelf she'd gotten from a neighbour (in trade for a potion to help the oak sapling in their front yard stop wilting, Stars had been told). She scribbled something down onto the paper before disappearing up the stairs.

She reappeared only a few moments later; carrying Stars' daytime clothes in her arms as she did.

Stars took her clothes, passing her son to Distro so she could get changed.

'He's getting heavy,' Distro commented, resting the child on her hip. Despite the child's size when compared to the small foxen woman, Distro had no trouble holding him.

'Yi!' Stars beamed as she tucked her singlet into her skirt and *clicked* the buckle on her belt shut. 'Dr Lakeki said that he's almost a healthy weight!'

'Good! You're fattening him up, just as you should be!' Distro joked as she nuzzled into the child's face and blew a raspberry into him. 'It took me *much* longer than it should have to put some meat on Ka'harja, you know! I tried so hard to get him to eat — you think he would have been a good eater, considering where he came from — but he was so hesitant to take anything from me, at first! I swear he thought I was trying to poison him!'

'Well... Kay'oten always made him wait until last to eat,' Stars said as she took her son back. 'If he ate without permission she would beat him up.'

A disgusted look passed over Distro, then, and Stars folded down her ears and looked away; scared she'd made the woman upset at her.

But, she realised quickly that it wasn't *her* that Distro was angry at as the foxen gave a low growl-like grunt and clicked her teeth together. '*Kay'oten*.... I wish I could kill her all over again, just to experience the feeling of her bones breaking between my teeth twice!'

Stars let her ears twitch back up as Distro gave a snort and shook her head.

Then the woman pulled down her hood over her head and her scarf up over her snout; taking a moment to adjust them before making for the door and beckoning Stars to follow.

'I wish you didn't hide your face all the time,' Stars said as she hurried after the woman. She ducked under the low doorway and stumbled out into the street as Distro closed the door behind them and realised that the air outside was warm and comfortable and the night was beautiful, and she wrung her hands as she realised *just* how cold she'd felt when she'd woken up. She wondered for a moment if Distro got the same sick feeling in her stomach when she thought of what Kay'oten did to Ka'harja, as she got when she thought of what Lah'kort might have done to her Little Demon.... Though she pushed the question to the back of her mind as she looked down to Distro and brushed a finger over the top of the woman's nub-like horns that poked out from her hood. 'I can't see you smile when you wear your scarf, and you have a very nice smile.'

'I'm more comfortable this way,' Distro replied, her tone much the same as Stars' as she pulled her hood firmer over her face. 'People stare less.'

Stars didn't think that was quite true— People seemed to stare at Distro just the same amount when she covered her face as they did when she didn't. They knew who she was, now, and even when she hid her draconic features with layers of cloth the people in the city still recognised her.

It was a curious kind of staring, Stars thought. An interest edged with the same sort of awe and amazement that the foxens in the caravan had had when Distro had first transformed and called forth the spirit of the maiden.

But Stars didn't argue her point. She knew it was pointless. Distro was stubborn, and it would be just the same as trying to argue with Ka'harja about being a dream master— They'd talk her in circles and then change the topic on her, and she'd be too stunned and frustrated to realise it had even happened until a few hours later.

So instead of trying to convince Distro that nobody was judging her, she let herself become distracted by her son as they started down the street; focusing her energy on him as he grabbed at her hair and clothes and babbled happily at her as if trying to hold conversation.

The market was on the other side of town and by the time they arrived the sun was starting to peek out over the horizon and several of the stalls were pulling down their waterproof tarps.

Stars greeted each shopkeeper pleasantly as she passed; though their responses felt so impersonal that by the time Distro paused to examine their wares, she was beginning to wonder if it was worth the effort....

She shook her head and pushed the thought away.

Of course it was worth the effort— Kindness was *always* worth the effort! If it wasn't, then she wouldn't even be here. If kindness wasn't worth it, Ka'harja and Distro and Sken and Annanyn and Koko and— And *everyone* who had helped her wouldn't have helped her. They would have left her behind.

*They would have left her behind like Fabecut did.*

The new and sudden thought smacked into her heart her like her father's palm against her cheek, and she took a laboured breath as she held her baby close and tried to keep her composure.

*Where in Underfor had that thought come from?*

Why had it been such a horrible one?

Why would she think something like that?

Distro's ear turned as Stars swallowed, and she knew the woman was watching her closely. Even if she wasn't looking directly at her.

So Stars took a deep breath, trying to even her breathing as she took the two steps to Distro's side and looked down at the meats she was examining.

'Are these farmed or hunted?' Distro asked the shopkeep.

'Farmed, hunted,' the shopkeep told her, motioning to each side of their stall in turn.

'Hm...' Distro rubbed her chin before selecting a cut of venison from the "hunted" side. 'Just this.'

Stars stopped paying attention, then, as her Little Demon gave a small cry and she realised that it was time to feed him again. She tugged out her shirt from her skirt and awkwardly lifted it; holding her son against her chest so he could latch on and eat.

She felt Distro tap her on the leg as she passed and, after her son was settled into feeding, she followed the foxen to the next market stall and quietly watched her buy a bag of uncooked rice. And then the next stall, where Distro bought a single lemon.

And then Little Demon unlatched from Stars' breast and she lifted him over her shoulder, petting him on the back until he burped and mumbled and closed his eyes to nap. She pecked a kiss onto him as he nuzzled into the curve of her neck, then looked back down to Distro and let out a long breath.

'Being a mother is a very scary thing,' Stars said, softly. 'You never feel like you can do enough to keep your berr safe, even when you're doing everything you can. You try and try and try, but there's so much you just can't fix....'

'Mm,' Distro gave a low hum of agreement as she became a little too focused on a cart of vegetables. 'I know what you mean.... It's okay, though, Stars. He'll be fine.'

'Dr Lakeki said he might never walk,' Stars pushed. 'His legs don't work properly. If we were still in Heck'ne, they would have killed him for that.'

'Well, then, it's a good thing you brought him here then, isn't it?' Distro said as she examined a potato. 'You did good, listening to your gut and getting him out. You're a good mother.'

'I don't *feel* like a good kekik,' Stars admitted. Then, after a long, long moment of silence as Distro squeezed a tomato, Stars flicked her ears down and sighed, 'What's going to happen to him if he never walks?'

'I'll buy him a wheelchair,' Distro answered, simply.

'A... wheel... chair?' Stars repeated, slowly. 'What's a wheelchair?'

'A chair with wheels,' said Distro.

Stars didn't quite get it, and as Distro glanced over her shoulder and grinned she realised her confusion must have been written all over her face.

'Lakeki might have one in her office she can show you,' Distro said with a chuckle. 'It's something that helps people who can't walk to move around.'

'Oh...' Stars' ears flicked back and forth for a moment as she thought very, *very* hard about what a chair with wheels might look like and how it might work. She settled on an image she wasn't sure was quite so accurate; a kitchen chair with four large caravan wheels instead of legs and a horse at the front to pull it. She knew it didn't seem



quite right. But it was all she could imagine as Distro purchased a bag's worth of vegetables and turned on her heels.

'Well, I'm done!' Distro blurted. 'We should head to Lakeki's for Demon's appointment. Ka'harja told me it was first thing?'

'Oh, yes, we don't want to be late!' Stars agreed, hurrying after Distro. 'Dr Lakeki said that Little Demon needs to get his "vaccinations." Though, I'm not entirely sure what those are.'

'Well...' Distro gave a loud sniff. 'I won't spoil the surprise.'

## **Chapter End.**

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