

## Chapter 10: Glif 5th, Minda Year 10,053 AE (The Nigelle Farm; Okatako)

The night was beautiful, and the air was cold and still. The near-cloudless sky above twinkled with stars, and the two almost-full moons lit up the world brighter than the colourful nebula behind them; washing the grassy field in silver and blue.

The third moon wasn't visible, as Stars stumbled through the strange doorway and gasped in awe at what she saw... but that was fairly normal, in Okatako.

Stars knew where she was the moment she smelt the wet grass and saw the shape of the mountains in the far distance. It was so familiar, and yet so alien— Like the halfway point between the world she'd grown up in and the one she lived in now.

The door behind her slammed, rather curtly, and she glanced back to see Rachel run her hand over it and open it again— And Stars gave another gasp.

The inside of the door was not where she had just been. Instead, it was different familiar room; one that had been destroyed many months ago. Five months, to be exact.

The kitchen of Ka'harja's house.

Stars stepped back, her gaze flicking over the old wooden house that she knew had burnt to the ground only half a year ago.

'*Five months away,*' she managed to breathe. 'Gighi, you— You took me five months away. It really *was* an answer...!'

Janet gave an enthusiastic nod, as Rachel shut the door again and dusted her hands.

'But— Portals can't do that!' Stars exclaimed. 'Portals are supposed to go from one place to another, not through time! That's what the books said, when I read them. They said that not many portals can go through time! Only the strongest portal makers can make portals that go through time. And the ones that *can* go through time can *never* go backwards, only forwards! The books said its kizza possible, to go back in time!'

Rachel just gave a humoured scoff. 'Well, it sounds like maybe your books are wrong—'

She cut off as there was a shout from inside; a familiar voice, that made Stars' heart leap to her throat.

'Ka'har—'

Rachel slapped a hand over Stars' mouth, holding her tight and still to quiet her.

'*Shh!*' she hissed, turning her gaze to the door as a muffled cry of pain came through it.

Distro's voice called out, her half-word almost completely unintelligible, as Janet pressed a finger to her lips in a motion for Stars to keep quiet.

'I'm fine!' Ka'harja's voice shouted, clearly lying through his teeth as the agony was clear in his voice.

'*He definitely does not sound fine,*' Rachel mumbled to herself, grimacing in a pained way.

Stars caught a glimpse of Ka'harja through the window as he limped out of the pantry— But only a glimpse, before she was yanked sideways and pressed between

Rachel and the outside wall of the house, out of sight from the man inside.

Ka'harja's shadow stretched out over the grassy field, cutting a dark shape within the window's light, and Stars swallowed the lump in her throat as she realised with a strange sinking feeling that this Ka'harja didn't know her yet.

*'Try not to be seen, while we're here,' Janet advised, leaning over to whisper in Stars' ear. 'It can make things complicated.... Once you're back in the right time you can say whatever you like about what you've seen. But until then, stay out of sight.'*

Stars twitched an ear. She wasn't sure anyone would believe her if she told them about what was happening right now. She said a lot of strange things —things that were a lot less strange than this— and it was very rare for anyone to believe those things. So she didn't think people would believe her for this. They'd probably say it was a dream. Or that she was hakalika in the head— *Completely ababhi!*

The front door of the Nigelle's old house opened and shut, and the trio waited with bated breath as Ka'harja hesitated and glanced around.

*'He can sense something's different,' Janet whispered. 'We should move, before he sees us.'*

*'Hold,' Rachel ordered. 'He's not on picket duty; his instincts might sense the magic, but he's got no reason to think anything's wrong....'*

Ka'harja's ear twitched and his attention was drawn away as there was a terrible, agonised scream in the far distance that made Stars' blood run cold.

It was coming from the direction of the wasteland, and Stars trembled in horror at the sound of it.

*'Block it out,' she heard Ka'harja whisper to himself. 'You can't help them. Just block it out and go do your job.'*

A shiver ran up Stars' spine, as Ka'harja let out a shaky breath and shook his head. And she watched as he hurried away into the direction he had been in, when they had first met.

None of the women moved until he was out of sight; it was only once they were sure he was gone that Rachel removed her hand from Stars' mouth.

*'That was close,' Janet sighed, casting Stars a worried glance. 'I thought he was going to turn and see you! And that would mess up everything!'*

*'He didn't know we were here,' Stars said simply; mostly to reaffirm to herself what was happening. She twitched an ear, listening to the night. 'I didn't notice last time I was here, because I was giving birth, but it's too quiet. There are no animals. Even the crickets are quiet. Usually there are birds and bugs making a lot of noise on nights like this. Why are they so quiet?'*

*'Old magic scares them,' Rachel commented. 'And there's a lot of it going around tonight. A little bit of me and my magic, but mostly it's the fallen stars. They're up there right now, moving into place above us, and the animals know it. Their instincts remember it from the old days.'*

*'The old days?' Stars echoed.*

*'You were Har'py once, yes?' Rachel asked. She grinned when Stars nodded. 'So you've heard of the wizard, Rendi, and the stolen stars he turned into his children? The war of sky and dirt? It's that same magic, from when the stars attacked the ground. Old and powerful, and the animals don't want to be involved with it.'*

Another scream filled the air, and Stars rubbed her arms, swallowing and feeling faint.

'Are you alright?' Janet asked, placing a kind hand on her shoulder. 'You look ill.... Is that screaming... *you?*'

'I was giving birth,' she said, her ears folding down as she heard another cry of agony. 'It was the most *miita* thing I'd ever been through. Even more painful than the other births with my other children. I didn't realise I could be heard all the way over here. I was so far away, I didn't know Ka'harja heard me.... He's my first baby that wasn't born dead. Do you think that's why it hurt so much more?'

Janet looked sympathetic, though Rachel just placed her hands on her hips and made a disapproving face. 'I didn't realise he was born *tonight*. Hm. Well, I suppose that's fate for you.'

'Fate?' Stars echoed. 'How is him being born tonight *fate?*'

'I can't say,' Rachel said, simply; motioning for the other women to follow her as she turned and started in the direction opposite the one Ka'harja had gone. 'Because if I did, you might change what happens. And it needs to happen.'

'Why would I change what happens?' Stars asked. 'Is it a bad thing, that happens?'

'In the moment, you will think it's the worst thing to ever happen to you in your life,' Rachel answered. 'And, perhaps, it might be. But it *needs* to happen, or the world will be stagnant forever.'

Stars scrunched her face up, as Janet's hand on her shoulder became an arm around her back and she was gently guided after Rachel. 'I don't think I like you much,' it came out of her before she realised what she was saying, and she blushed deeply when she heard it.

'And, yet, you're still going to save my life,' Rachel chuckled. 'Don't worry, though, barely anyone who meets me likes me.'

'I like you,' Janet commented.

'I still don't know why!' it was a humoured exclamation, thrown casually over Rachel's shoulder, but Stars thought it hid some sort of other emotion— She was familiar with the tone of sadness that peeked through her words. Like she thought what she said was actually true and not a joke at all, but couldn't admit bare to admit it.

Janet cast Stars an uncomfortable glance; though it was short-lived as Rachel pressed on and picked up speed, and the two girls had to hurry after her.

They walked for what must have been at least an hour. Maybe two. It was hard to tell exactly what their pace was, in the hilly grassland. All Stars knew was she was relieved that her past-self's cries had disappeared into the distance.

'I think it's about here,' Rachel gave a sniff and slowed to a stop, before examining the ground, and then the sky, and then the ground again. 'Hm.... Yeah. Here. Come on, back up! Don't want it to land on you!'

'Land on me?' Stars felt the hair on the back of her neck stand on end. 'You mean... the fallen stars?'

'Yep! Back up, now! Top of the hill over there!'

Stars did as she was told; stepping clumsily backwards as Rachel ushered her uphill with a wide motion of her arms.

'Up, up, up!'

'Rachel!' Janet gave a gasp and pointed to the sky above, and as Rachel turned, Stars' eyes went wide as she saw the two familiar shooting stars, falling side by side in the colourful night.

They fell together for a moment, before one arced away to the left and the other began to drop, and grow— And grow!

'Brace!' Rachel ordered, and Stars felt Janet grab her by the arm to hold her in place as the falling star approached them.

It fell to the ground with a flash of yellow light and a *BOOM* that was followed by a scream—a shriek of pain—and Stars saw a snake-like form rise from the stone as if trying to escape it. It lifted its many arms to the sky, grasping for the stars above and crying out:

'My children!'

Rachel waved a hand, and a shimmering magic layered in the air around them; absorbing the force of the collision as it rippled out with a thundering rush of air that shot through the grass, sending a powerful and familiar wave through the field that Stars knew would soon collide with her past self.

'I'm sorry!' the creature from the stone wailed mournfully, flickering like a rainbow flame and buzzing with a bee-like sound. *'I'm sorry!'*

And then it was pulled back to the stone; screaming in desperation to escape it.

*Glowing stones that devoured the soul*, Stars felt the hair on the back of her neck stand on end as she recalled the old Har'py teaching.

She couldn't help but swallow down the lump in her throat as she glanced up and watched the second stone fall to the horizon; far away and out of view.

She didn't hear another cry like she had with the first one (though, perhaps that was because of the distance) but she watched as the second rush of air and force approached and passed her; bouncing harmlessly off Rachel's magic barrier.

A moment of silence passed, and Rachel dropped the magical shield; giving a loud sniff and crossing her arms as Janet glanced up at the sky.

*'There they go,'* Janet mumbled.

Stars followed her gaze curiously, wondering who she could possibly mean.... And it was then that she saw something else in the sky; something she had been in too much pain to see, the last time she found herself living through this night.

A row of blinking lights, too uniform to be regular stars, spinning in a whirl and shrinking further and further away into the distance.

Janet lifted a hand to her brow as she looked to the lights, as if shielding her eyes from a sunny day.

And Rachel just scoffed. 'At ease, soldier.'

Janet rolled her eyes.

And Stars cocked her head, finding herself utterly bewildered by the strange women and their unusual conversation.

'Were those gods?' she asked.

'Were what gods?' Rachel retorted.

'You mean the lights?' Janet asked. 'Oh, no— Those were nurlak.'

'Nurlak? In the sky?' Stars' ear twitched. 'Were they dead?'

'What?'

'Were they dead?' she repeated. 'Ka'harja said that, when Animon die, Scara gives them glowing hair and turns them into stars. Those were stars in the sky, weren't they? And if they were nurlak, then they must be dead.'

Janet bit her lip. 'Well, they—'

'Yeah, sure,' Rachel interrupted. 'You're right. They're dead.'

Janet cast Rachel a glance that Stars didn't understand; though it was clearly expressing some sort of annoyance. Rachel shook her head, Janet furrowed her brow, and they had some sort of silent argument that ended in Janet throwing up her hands in defeat.

'Yeah. They're dead,' she said, sounding like she didn't want to say it.

It was very clear to Stars that it was a lie, but she didn't think it was too wise to argue. Not with Rachel, at least. She reminded Stars of some of the people she'd known before —the kind of people that might have left her behind to fend for herself, if she disagreed one too many times— and she thought it was best to bite her tongue and pretend that Rachel's dishonesty wasn't blatantly obvious.

Seemingly content with Stars' lack of argument, Rachel gave another haughty sniff and made her way downhill towards the crater left by the fallen star.

It was, considering the force the star had thrown out when it had landed, a rather small hole. Only twice as long as the stone, itself; and the stone was only as large as a loaf of bread.

Stars couldn't believe it, as she followed after Rachel to peer at the stone.

It was glowing red-hot, with heat visibly rising from it and warping the air like a fire in the night.

Rachel stepped around it, waving a hand and muttering something in a language Stars didn't understand, and the fallen star rapidly cooled; turning from a deep red to a golden-bronze colour.

Stars recognised with a curious twitch of her ear that this was *soulstone*, and she wondered how it had turned yellow instead of blue.

Janet watched on with a tense expression, as Rachel cooled the crystal. 'Should we get the other—'

'No. We only need the one half of her,' Rachel said, simply. 'The other will make its own journey in time. For now, we don't *want* her at full strength. Do you remember how she was the last time we talked with her? And that was when she'd had time to calm down. She might actually kill us if we put the pieces back together now!'

She then knelt on one knee to pick up the stone, and whispered to it in that strange, near unintelligible language that Stars had never heard before now.

The stone's light dimmed to a dull glow, and Rachel's face twisted in a scowl.

'I thought so,' she muttered, her annoyance clear in her tone. 'She's not going to talk to us.'

'Why not?' Stars asked.

'We're human.'

Stars didn't think they looked human. But she wasn't going to argue that with these strange, powerful women. Not when she was five months away from home.

'I can't believe they jettisoned her,' said Janet as she stepped to Stars side and gave a mournful sigh.

'She jettisoned herself,' Rachel corrected, turning the stone in her hands. 'Didn't you? I know you sacrificed yourself, you altruistic bitch.'

'Rachel!'

Rachel ignored Janet's protest, instead pulling out a canvas bag from her pocket and slipping the stone inside. She held the bag out to Stars, who hesitated to take it.

'Take her,' Rachel told her, her voice firm and somewhat annoyed.

Stars' ears folded back, and her eyes tightened in distrust.

They had said they were paying back a favour, and that they wanted to save her son's life... but they hadn't told her anything else. And after all she'd seen, she wasn't sure she trusted Rachel. She didn't seem like a good person, with the things she'd said, and Stars didn't think she wanted to believe that her son was going to be in any sort of danger, at all... not after all the work she'd done to make him safe.

But then Janet's hand lay on her shoulder, and she felt herself heave a sigh as the woman cast her a resigned look.

She didn't really have a *choice* but to take the stone, did she?

'You said this will save Little Demon's life?' she asked out loud.

Rachel nodded.

'How?'

'I can't tell you that,' Rachel answered.

Stars crossed her arms—all four of them—and turned herself away. 'I'm not taking it. Not until you tell me what you mean.'

Rachel's annoyed expression turned to a scowl, and the feathers of her wings pricked up with her deep breath. She spoke through her teeth as she stepped towards Stars and pushed the fallen star into her side. 'I didn't waste all this magic just for you to get stubborn at the last minute.'

'Tell me how this will save my son,' Stars retorted, tightening her arms and trying not to tremble as Rachel gave her the same kind of look that Lah'kort would give her, when she would stay out too long at night when he wanted her home. 'Tell me. I want to know why my berr will be miita.'

'Take. Her.'

'Na.'

'Take her!'

'Na!'

Rachel's jaw *clicked* audibly, as she licked her teeth and glowered at Stars. Then, she gave a defeated-but-frustrated sigh through her nose and growled, 'Seven years,' she said, her voice dripping with venom. 'In seven years, he's going to get sick. And she knows the cure.'

'Seven years?' Stars twitched her ear, her firm expression faltering. 'If he's going to be sick in seven years, why have you come to me now? Why would you do this to me now, and give me so much time to worry?'

'Because now is the only time you'll be willing to listen to us,' Janet answered, her hand squeezing Stars' shoulder gently. 'If we came to you later, while he was sick, you would be grieving too much to trust us.'

'Take the *fucking* stone, Stars,' Rachel growled, forcing the bag into the nurlak's arms and turning away. 'Come on. We've wasted enough time standing around; it's time you went home.'

Stars let out a breath and shivered, as Rachel turned away from her— And she felt Janet's hand give her a comforting pat before the woman helped her sling the bag with the stone in it onto her shoulder to carry.

None of them said anything on the walk back to Ka'harja's old house; though Rachel held up a hand to signal them to keep quiet, as there was a surprised shout.

'GIGHI! WHAT IS THAT?! IT'S HUGE!'

Janet took Stars' arm and pulled her back behind the hill they had almost

stepped over; holding her back as the trio peeked over carefully to watch the familiar scene play out in front of them.

Stars felt her heart pang.

It had only been five months, but looking at herself— She was in a terrible state. She was clearly exhausted, and out of her mind from the pain of birth and lack of sleep and tiny food rations she'd been surviving off.

It broke her heart to see herself in such a way, and she realised she liked what she'd been seeing in the bathroom mirror of their new house much much better than the woman she saw now.

She watched in silence as her past self was let inside, and then heaved a sigh as Janet took her by the arm again to lead her down the hill.

They found their way to the back door, and as Rachel began running her hand over it Stars heard the loud conversation going on inside and made sure to keep herself away from the windows.

She wrung her hands as Janet rubbed a hand on her back, and they both watched as Rachel silently worked on the door.

'Stars,' Janet whispered, leaning close to Stars' ear so that the occupants inside the house couldn't hear her. '*Listen, I'm sorry we can't tell you everything. We have our reasons, please trust us about that— We really do just want to help you, and don't mean to confuse you.*'

Stars gave a slow, unsure nod; wanting to trust Janet, but not sure if she did.

'*You're going to change the world with your kindness, Stars,*' Janet told her as Rachel stepped away from the door and let out a long breath. '*You've already done more than you could ever imagine. So, please, don't forget who you are. Even when it gets hard.*'

Stars didn't understand; but she didn't have time to question Janet, before Rachel turned around and cleared her throat.

'Stars?' Rachel asked, beckoning the woman over.

Stars gave a frustrated ear-flick of acknowledgement, as Janet nudged her towards the other woman. 'Yi, Rachel?'

'Tell Distro we're sorry about Luana,' Rachel said, softly; seemingly genuine as her voice grew sad. 'She had to get hurt, to stop him from.... It's a bad timeline, but it was better than the alternative.'

Stars opened her mouth to question Rachel's meaning, but before she could the woman yanked open the door she'd enchanted and pushed Stars through.

Stars stumbled as the door was slammed behind her, and fell to the ground with a cry that was echoed by a surprised and familiar shriek.

For a moment, Stars lay stunned. And then the door she'd come through opened again and the surprised shriek screamed again, and Stars realised that it was Ka'harja she'd heard and quickly rolled over to look at him.

He was sitting on the toilet, a horrified and haunted look in his eyes as he looked from Stars to the bathroom door and back.

'*Wha—*' his voice was a high-pitched squeak of confusion. '*Wha— Wha— That was outside?!*'

'Stars!' Distro's own voice exclaimed from the door, filled with worry, and Stars turned to see that she looked just as haunted as her son. '*Where have you been?!* We've been worried sick about you!'

'I was—'

'You can't just *do* this to us, Stars!' Distro snapped, rushing over to throw her arms around the nurlak. 'We thought something had *happened* to you! Where were you? And how did you get in here without me seeing you— I was on the couch, how did— Where *were* you?!

'I was—'

'STARS!' Dena's shriek cut her daughter off, and her arms were suddenly wrapped around Stars tightly. 'Stars! Oh, Zen'efay, I thought something had happened to you! I thought you were miita— Or worse— Don't! Don't you *ever* worry me like this again!' she pulled away, gripping her daughter's face and meeting her eye as she scolded her, and Stars saw she had been crying. 'Tirr basaka terr kunya! Tirr lenta! Basaka tarr miita! Basaka tarr zi'kaf! Or worse! Tirr lenta! Tirr mup lenta, Stars! I was so frightened for you! Alik hakalika! Broja'kar! Tell me where you have been! Now! Broja'kar!'

Stars was too stunned to answer her mother.

Why was everyone acting like this?

She had only been gone for a few hours— That wasn't unusual, for her. She would go out on her own all the time....

'Broja'kar, Stars!' Dena snapped, her breath shaking as she choked on a sob. 'Where? *Where?!* I thought you were dead, Stars! I thought you were dead! Where were you?!

'I was...' Stars paused, expecting to get cut off again; though when she didn't she swallowed and continued. 'I was in the past.'

'What?!' Dena snapped.

'I was in the past,' Stars repeated, flinching at her mother's horrified look. 'I... I'm confused. Why is everyone so upset? I've only been gone a little while.'

Distro shook her head at Stars, as Dena stepped away and covered her face with all four of her hands.

'*Oh, you're going hakalika like Ta'lak,*' Dena whispered under her breath, and Stars felt her heart squeeze painfully.

'I'm not hakalika; it's true,' she said. 'I went five months away. Back to the night Little Demon was born.'

Dena shook her head, seemingly at a loss for words, before retreating out of the room with a sob.

Stars made to follow, rising to her feet and taking two steps, before Distro cut her off and blocked her way.

'Wait, wait!' she exclaimed, furrowing her brow as Stars looked down at her. 'Stars, wait. Give her a moment.'

'I don't understand!' Stars said. 'Why is everyone being so strange? Why was Kekik so worried? I was only gone for the night— I do that all the time!'

'The night?' the sound of the toilet flushing made Stars twitch her ear, and she turned to Ka'harja as he washed his hands. 'Stars, you were gone a *lot* longer than one night!'

'A'la'ha?' Stars cocked her head. 'Na?'

'*Yeah,*' Ka'harja retorted.

For a moment, Stars stared at Ka'harja. Then, she twitched an ear and realised that the rain had stopped. Not only that, but the air felt dry and warm. Strange, for



the day after such a heavy storm....

She felt her skin crawling, as she looked from Distro, to Ka'harja, to the window that let in light from the orange-and-red sunset outside.

'I was gone for more than a day,' she realised aloud. 'How long have I been gone?'

'Ten days,' Distro said, carefully. 'It's the fifteenth— You've been gone for ten days.'

'Ten days?' Stars managed. She found it hard to believe.... Though, she found everything that had just happened to her hard to believe. 'It was only a few hours, for me. I went to the past. Janet and Rachel took me— Maybe they put me too far forward by accident—' she cut off as she thought of how annoyed Rachel had been at her, and wondered if it might *not* have been accidental.

Distro crossed her arms, at mention of the girls. 'Janet and Rachel, you say?'

'Yi,' Stars nodded. 'Two women. They said they were human, but they had wings like someone from the Rendi. Blue and purple. They opened a portal in the bathroom door, and took me back to the night Little Demon was born.'

'Mm.'

'I'm not hakalika!' Stars defended, her voice turning pleading. 'They were real people, not in my head! They were!'

Ka'harja's hand placed on Stars' shoulder, and he gave her a comforting nod. 'I believe you,' he said.

'I don't... *not* believe you,' Distro agreed, in a very cautious way. 'But I don't know if I... believe *it*.'

'I'm not lying!' Stars exclaimed. 'Na maka! Na!'

Distro raised a hand to silence Stars, and gave her a look that was as pensive as it was sympathetic. 'I don't think you're lying. And I don't think you're crazy,' she reassured. 'But I don't know if you saw what you thought you did; if *you* were the one lied to. Janet and Rachel— They're not real. Well, there's never been anything to prove they are, anyway.'

Stars cocked her head, and gave Distro a confused look. A short, frustrated whine escaped her as the foxen shrugged, and she wrung her hands. 'I don't understand, Kekik Distro. Do you know Janet and Rachel?'

'I've heard of them before, yes,' Distro said, with a disbelieving sigh. 'You can read about them at the library, if you like; myths and legends, section. Janet and Rachel are supposedly two pests who jump through time and cause problems.... The chances that it was *actually* them is next to impossible. Even if they *do* exist, they've only been spotted during what people say are "significant shifts in destiny"— You know, stuff like the births of heroes or the turning points of wars.... It was most likely just some weirdos pretending to be them. But, either way, they're just looking to cause problems. Don't listen to a *thing* they've said to you!'

Stars wasn't sure if what Distro said made her relieved, or even more anxious.

Shifts in destiny....

Like someone being born? Or someone leaving everything they knew behind and changing their entire life, all in one night?

Or like... saving someone's life?

'They said they wanted to save Little Demon's life,' Stars blurted. She shifted the bag on her shoulder, then, and pulled out the glowing yellow stone to show to her

family. 'They took me back to the day he was born, and we watched the stars fall again,' she held the stone out to Distro, taking a knee so she could look the woman in the eyes as her pleading tone returned. 'There's a person inside the stone. They said Little Demon is going to get very sick, and that she's going to know how to make him better.'

Distro's lips pursed, tight and thin, and she looked conflicted. Like she didn't want to believe Stars was lying or crazy; but like the idea of the alternative made her even more uncomfortable and she didn't want to think it was true.

Stars knew couldn't blame Distro for not wanting to believe her. *She* almost couldn't believe what had happened to her— If it wasn't for the fallen star in her hand, she might have dismissed it as a strange dream.

'They knew your name,' Stars commented.

'At this point, who in town *doesn't* know my name?' Distro huffed.

'They knew that I know you—'

'Stars, the amount of times we've been seen together...' Distro shook her head. 'I don't doubt you've been shown something; but I doubt that what they showed you was really the past—'

'They took me to the day the stars fell!' Stars pressed, desperate for Distro to believe her. 'I saw your old house— I saw *me!* I saw *myself*, sick and tired and dirty! That wasn't fake! They couldn't have made a fake me! They couldn't have made it say the things I said! Nobody else knew what I said! Nobody else but Kekik and Ka'harja! And Ka'harja's forgotten every word! So there's no way that he's told anyone!'

Ka'harja gave an anxious nod, as Stars motioned at him. 'She's right,' he confirmed. 'I don't remember a thing.'

Distro squeezed her eyes shut, frustrated creases pressing into her brow as she looked pained and anxious. She turned her whole body from Stars, as if trying to escape her miserable gaze but refusing to physically walk out on her.

Stars felt her heart pounding, and her lip trembling, as she watched the woman struggle to believe her.

'Kekik Distro?'

Distro let out a breath and opened her eyes, glancing sideways at Stars. 'You said they knew my name?'

'Yi,' Stars confirmed. 'They told me to tell you...'

'Tell me what?'

'That they're sorry about... Luana?' Stars' own brow furrowed as she tried to recall *exactly* what they'd said. 'And... that she had to get hurt, because it was the better timeline?'

Distro gave a scoff, and threw her hands up in an exaggerated way. 'Who the *fuck* is Luana?! I've never met anyone called "Luana"! What crock! What absolute fucking crock!'

Though Distro's words were harsh, Stars thought she heard a tinge of fear in her voice. An anxiety, of what might be to come.

That was when Dena returned to the bathroom; her eyes freshly-red from another bout of crying and a guilty —almost stunned to vacant— look on her face.

She stood in the doorway for a moment before stepping to the side and glancing behind her... and Stars gasped when she saw her son; held firm but gentle in the arms

of a strange foxen woman as he nursed.

At her gasp, Little Demon looked up, unlatched from the woman's breast, and reached out his arms towards his mother. He let out a miserable wail as he grabbed at the air, and Stars dropped the fallen star, letting it fall to the floor with a heavy *thump!* as she rose from her kneel and rushed over to take up her son and embrace him tight.

'Shh! Shh!' she comforted as she bounced him. 'I'm here. Don't cry. Na tiirl. I'm here. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to leave you. I'm sorry. Na tiirl, farfah katka. I'm here.'

## **Chapter End.**

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