

## Chapter 2: Morah 34<sup>th</sup>, Grada Year 10,053 AE (The Consult Room; Dr Lakeki's Clinic)

The consult room was cool and comfortable, despite the smell of alcoholic antiseptic that clung to every surface. It had been decorated in a very thoughtful way to try and bring comfort to the children who came in for treatment. The walls were painted with a colourful scene; an unnaturally bright blue sky filled with fluffy white clouds sat flat behind grassy green hills, which were broken only by stylised trees and cutely-drawn dogs. The chairs were carved with snake-shaped legs and painted with an overwhelming array of colours, and the lamps that held the soulstone lights that brightened the room were shaped like little fruits and vegetables. Even the jar of chocolate drops (which were all very bitter dark chocolate, as most foxen children preferred) was in the shape of a snake curled up protectively around its eggs.

The window on the far wall had been opened to try and air the room out of a very pungent vomit smell that hadn't quite faded since the previous patient had somehow managed to shoot a spray across a section of the roof.

The open window carried the screeching sound of Little Demon's wails into the street, causing passersby to give quick glances into the room before realising it was a clinic and hurrying past.

Stars tried desperately to comfort her baby, but he had just been given *eleven* different injections and a significant amount of her energy was currently going into not bursting into tears, herself, as the crippling feeling that she had broken his trust ripped at her heart.

'His lungs are getting stronger, at least,' Dr Lakeki said with a sheepish look as she thumbed at the latch on the box of used needles. 'That had me *very* concerned. Even for a dassen he wasn't making enough noise.'

Stars held Little Demon closer, pressing another kiss into his cheek as she didn't acknowledge the doctor. *She could barely take it, anymore! She hated seeing her son cry like this!*

Distro clicked her teeth together and nodded as Stars gave a whimper and a sniff, and she addressed the doctor instead, 'He's been making a lot of noise, lately. Mostly babbling and laughing.'

'Not so much crying?'

'Honestly? No,' Distro answered. 'He does do it, but not often. He usually gives these quiet, upset exclamations instead. I suppose they're *technically* crying, but not like *this*,' she motioned to Little Demon. 'It's more like he's saying "hey!" and then waiting for a response. And, well. Stars almost always responds before it comes to actual crying.... *Because she's a good mother.*'

The last sentence was aimed in Stars' direction; Distro's voice rising to try and get the woman's attention.

Stars heard her, though her only response was to curl tighter into her child and comfort him with even more kisses.

She was supposed to *protect* him from pain! To make him feel like nothing was ever going to hurt him!

But instead she'd held him in place while he'd wailed and cried and wiggled and looked at her with those sad, pleading eyes that screamed; *I don't know what's happening! Help me!*

And even though she trusted Dr Lakeki and knew that the injections were to keep him healthy and safe, she couldn't help but feel like she'd betrayed him.

'Mhm,' Dr Lakeki hummed, making a note in Little Demon's file. 'I feel confident putting that down to his dassen lineage.... I'm not *too* familiar with dassen-specific biology, but I *have* been doing some reading on them since our initial appointment and that sounds fairly normal.'

'Babies not crying is so strange,' Distro continued. 'I remember my younger brothers used to cry over every little thing. Though, they were wolveren. And in my experience wolveren *adults* have a tantrum over every little thing, too!'

Lakeki muffled her chuckle. And then she took a deep breath before her smile fell and she rapped her fingers over the top of her used-needle-box and flicked back one of her braids. She had that look in her eyes, similar to how Ka'harja would look when he was thinking hard about how to say something.

'There is... *one* more thing that's concerning me,' she finally decided on.

Stars's ears twitched, and she finally looked up at the woman; worry all over her face as she met Dr Lakeki's gentle-but-serious gaze.

'You've not been vaccinated, have you, Stars?' she asked.

Stars shook her head.

'I didn't think so,' a short breath, not *quite* a sigh but also not quite *not* a sigh, escaped the doctor as her fingers closed into a fist and she gave her needle box a quiet knock with her knuckles. 'You know I'm very concerned about Little Demon's health. In his current condition he really can't risk getting sick. And, while you're breastfeeding, anything you catch will be passed down to him.... And because you've been travelling the likelihood of you having caught something is significantly raised...' she rubbed at her chin before pressing back her ears. 'I think you should be vaccinated, yourself, as well as taking some preemptive treatments for things you might have picked up. I don't usually treat adults, but I think that the time it would take you to find a doctor for yourself would be too much of a risk, so I'm willing to make an exception today.'

Stars' ears flicked down and she felt her eyes go wide as she glanced to Distro. 'Wh... What do you mean? Things I might have picked up?'

'Well, when I spoke with Dr Missesa—'

'*Coff*,' Distro clarified to Stars.

'He said that he didn't have the stocks for treating nurlak illnesses,' Dr Lakeki continued. 'He didn't need to, with the caravan he worked for having no nurlak with them. Until they took you in, of course,' she took a deep breath, looking sheepish. 'I didn't have much stock, either, as aren't many nurlak in town. But I contacted some of my colleagues in other clinics and they told me what I needed.'

Stars swallowed as Dr Lakeki opened a draw in her desk and took out a small, lidless box of syringes, salves, and bottles.

‘There are twenty-seven different treatments in this box,’ she said, bluntly. ‘And with your consent, I would like to administer all of them.’

Stars had to fight the urge to climb out the open window and run home to hide under her bed. She remembered how uncomfortable some of the treatments that Coff had given her had been, and looking at her poor Little Demon, now....

She swallowed, pushing down her fears and giving a small nod. ‘Yi,’ she said. ‘That’s okay. You can do that.’

‘Thank you,’ Dr Lakeki gave her own nod and immediately began going through the box. She took out several of the pre-filled syringes and laid them out in order. ‘I think we should start with the vaccinations. They protect against some of the more severe illnesses....’

Stars nodded again, and felt Distro’s hand brush gently against her arm. She glanced to the woman with a nervous look and was met with a warm-but-sympathetic smile.

Then, she took in a deep breath. ‘Kekik Distro?’

‘Yes, hon?’

‘Will you hold my Little Demon?’

‘Of course.’

Gently, not actually wanting to give up her still-wailing son, Stars laid her baby into Distro’s arms and pulled back; all four of her hands wringing with anxiety.

‘Now, now,’ Distro comforted, holding Little Demon against her shoulder and petting his back as she stood and paced the room. ‘You’re alright. You’re alright. I know it hurts, but you’re going to be okay....’

‘Stars?’ Dr Lakeki gently got Stars’ attention, and the nurlak turned to her just in time to watch as she removed the protective metal cap from the needle in her hand. ‘This might sting a little bit, but it won’t be too painful, I promise.’

‘Okay,’ Stars managed. She took a deep breath as Dr Lakeki stepped around the desk and took up at her side.

The woman had to climb onto Distro’s abandoned chair to stand even close to eye-height with Stars, and after a moment to get her balance she took a deep, calming breath and spoke softly. ‘Try to relax,’ she said, cleaning Stars’ arm with a small wet swab. ‘It will hurt less if you do.’

Stars didn’t like that combination of words; she thought that she might have heard that advice before, somewhere a long time ago, though she couldn’t place it as a sharp sting pierced the shoulder of her upper left arm and she squeezed her eyes shut tight. ‘*It hurts!*’ she squeaked. ‘*It hurts like a bite!*’

‘Almost through it,’ Dr Lakeki comforted. Then she removed the needle and taped down a piece of cotton onto Stars’ arm where she’d been injected. ‘There we go. First one done. Was that as bad as you thought?’

‘Na,’ Stars admitted, feeling herself relax. ‘It *did* hurt though.... It must have hurt even more for my poor Little Demon....’

‘Yes, things like this do tend to hurt more when we’re young,’ Dr Lakeki agreed, retrieving and preparing the next injection. ‘But it’s necessary. You understand?’

‘I understand,’ Stars confirmed, looking away as Dr Lakeki cleaned another spot on

her arm. 'I know sometimes things are miita and hurt, even when they're good for you. I wish that wasn't how it was, though. I think it's strange that's how the world works. It would be much more mip if the things that were good for you felt good, too.'

'Perhaps we could talk as a distraction,' Dr Lakeki suggested. 'I still have some more questions about your family history.'

'Yi, I can talk,' Stars replied. 'I'm very good at talking.'

'Aren't you ever?' Distro chuckled, a hand gently petting Stars' side.

Stars tried to focus on Distro's touch, instead of the second needle that poked her arm. 'What questions do you want to ask? I might not be able to answer them all. I've never been very good at answering questions. I don't know very much at all, so I'm usually better at asking them.'

The second needle was removed from her arm, and another swab was stuck down to stop the bleeding.

'I've got in my notes that your mother has dwarfism,' Dr Lakeki said, softly, and began to clean another spot on Stars' arm. 'Are there any other medical conditions that might run in your family?'

'Hm...' Stars had to think hard about that one. 'You mean sicknesses?'

'Yes,' Dr Lakeki answered, pushing the third needle through Stars' skin. 'Any deformities or sicknesses. Or anything you know that has killed family members before.'

'Oh, sabre cats and spiders, mostly,' Stars said, flicking her ears as Lakeki gave a nod that told her that wasn't *quite* what she'd meant but she wasn't going to say so out loud. 'Um.... I had other babies, too. But they were all born dead.'

'I'm sorry to hear that,' Dr Lakeki's tone was soft and genuine, as she sighed and taped another swab to Stars' arm. 'Miscarriages are hard to process. Especially for wanted children.'

'They *were* wanted,' Stars returned the sigh. 'I wanted each and every one of them, but none of them ever breathed. Not one breath.... I don't know what I was doing wrong.'

'I'm sure it wasn't your fault,' Dr Lakeki reassured. 'A lot of pregnancies in the Heck'ne fail.'

'Really?' Stars asked, trying to ignore how tender her arm was becoming as Dr Lakeki cleaned another spot.

'Yes. I remember my mentor telling me once that around fifteen percent of Heck'nerian pregnancies fail,' she said, though Stars didn't understand what the word *percent* meant. 'Here in the Empire we have less than three percent fail. Life in the Heck'ne is hard, and it puts a strain on expecting mothers. It's not anyone's fault; it's just a sad fact of life. I remember my mentor telling me a miscarriage was why she left Heck'ne to become a healer.'

Stars cocked her head as Dr Lakeki mentioned her mentor. 'Your mentor was from Heck'ne?' she asked. 'Was she a runaway?'

'No, no,' Dr Lakeki shook her head, injecting Stars again. 'She wasn't. She didn't have anything to run away from— She was proud to be Heck'nerian.'

Stars' knew she was making a rude face, but she wasn't able to stop herself. *Proud to be Heck'nerian....* The only people she'd ever known who were proud to be

Heck'nerian were people like Lah'kort and Kay'oten; terrifying warriors who hurt anyone they could just to prove their strength.

'Hm...' Dr Lakeki paused, her hand hovering over her next needle for a long moment.... She didn't pick it up as she turned back to Stars and gave her a sympathetic ear-flick. 'Dr Missesa told me about your troop.'

'He did?' Stars' rude face turned into a sad one, then, and her gaze fell to the floor.

'Yes. And I understand why you're hesitant to trust people from your old culture, but...' she paused again, looking unsure. 'Well. I'm not sure if it's my place to say. I don't want to upset you or be rude.'

Stars' ears perked up, at that, and she couldn't help giving a weak smile. 'Thank you. Not many people think about not wanting to offend me. It's okay if you say what you want to say, even if it's rude. I say rude things all the time. Never on purpose, though. Always on accident.'

Dr Lakeki gave a polite half-nod, half-bow to the nurlak, before speaking softly, 'I don't believe you were raised in the real Har'py religion.'

Stars felt herself making another rude face; this one just as confused as the last.

'My mentor told me about her time in Heck'ne,' Dr Lakeki clarified. 'She said there were a lot of cults using the Har'py name to teach sacrilegious beliefs.'

'Sacrilegious?' Stars echoed.

'Lies,' Dr Lakeki said, simply. 'They taught lies.'

Stars shifted anxiously, not liking what she was hearing but not completely sure why it bothered her so much. She cast a glance to Distro and was glad to see that her discomfort was matched; she told herself if Distro was uncomfortable, too, then it meant she wasn't being *completely* unreasonable....

'I've upset you, Dr Lakeki observed with a wince. 'I'm sorry. It's just.... Heck'ne equality is something I feel rather strongly about. Um. Dr Missesa said that chose me specifically because my mentor was outspoken on discrimination against Heck'nerian immigrants. He knew I wouldn't judge you for anything that might have happened to you, or that you... might have done.'

Stars felt her shoulders go slack, at that. 'I...' she paused, her ears folding down and her nose scrunching up in an upset expression. 'I don't really want to talk about what happened to me,' she admitted. 'I'm not mad at you; I know you're just trying to be nice to me. But it... really hurts to talk about right now. I'm not sure why.'

'I understand,' Dr Lakeki said, softly. 'We can drop the subject— I'll only bring it up when I have to for Little Demon's health.... We've gotten off-topic, anyway.'

'Have we?' Stars asked, her ears twitching as Dr Lakeki nodded. 'What were we meant to be talking about?'

'Sicknesses that run in the family,' Dr Lakeki reminded her. Then, she turned and retrieved the next needle and sterile swab. 'Physical or mental.'

'Mental sicknesses?' Stars cocked her head— Then took in a hiss of air as the needle stung her arm. 'You mean being ababhi?'

Dr Lakeki pulled the needle from Stars' skin and then paused; a sad and sympathetic look on her face. 'I wouldn't use a slur for it, but... yes.'

Stars wasn't sure, exactly, what a "slur" was, but the way that Dr Lakeki looked at

her made her chest tight in a way she could barely understand. Like the woman could see into her past, and hear all the times she had been called that word— And it was clear she thought that it had never been deserved.

‘They used to call me hakalika, too,’ Stars said. ‘Hakalika in the head.’

‘*Mm*,’ Dr Lakeki gave a hum and a nod, as she picked up the needles she’d used so far and placed them in her needle-box. ‘Was anyone else in your family hakalika?’ she asked.

Stars shrugged, letting out a long, sad breath as she did. ‘I think that answer might change, if you asked different people. My rek —um, that... that means sister— she used to say that my yalfit, who was both our gorg but not *her* yalfit... uh.... that means she was —’

‘I know Har’py words,’ Dr Lakeki reassured, sitting down in the chair she’d been standing on and pulling her notebook into her lap so she could write. ‘He was your father but not hers, and you all shared a mother. Correct?’

Stars nodded, and felt Distro’s hand pet her leg as she passed— And as she did, she realised Little Demon had finally stopped crying.

‘Her name was Ta’lak,’ she said. ‘Ta’lak used to always say that Lah’kort was hakalika, because he would get so angry even when nothing had happened. So angry that he would walk around and talk to himself and growl and get into fights. Ta’lak would tell him he was hakalika for it, and then he would yell that *she* was the hakalika one, because she would hear people talking when they weren’t there.’

‘*Ah*,’ Dr Lakeki underlined that note. ‘Hearing voices is concerning. Do *you* ever hear voices in your head?’

‘Just my own, and that’s mostly when I talk,’ Stars answered. ‘I never heard voices like her. She had entire friends that nobody else could see. Kekik used to say she’d grow out of them, but I don’t think she really believed it.... Kekik *never* seemed to believe the things she said. Not really.’

‘I see,’ pen tapping against her notebook, Dr Lakeki chewed her lip. ‘I *see*.... Lah’kort’s aggression —and I’m sorry to ask you this— but was it... directional?’

‘A’la’ha?’ Stars questioned. ‘What do you mean by “directional”?’

‘Was it outwards anger, at everyone else? Or inwards at himself?’

‘Oh, outwards,’ Stars confirmed. ‘Always outwards. Usually at me or Kekik.’

‘Mhm,’ Dr Lakeki crossed out a note— And then, after a moment of hesitation, rewrote it. ‘Hm.... He never hurt himself?’

‘No,’ Stars shook her head. ‘Why?’

‘I’m just wondering if it was caused by the culture he was raised in, or if it is a symptom of something... *else*,’ she replied, a careful and deliberate note to her tone that Stars didn’t understand.

However, Distro seemed to know exactly what was being implied, and shook her head at the doctor. ‘It wasn’t the self-feeding sickness,’ she told her. ‘I met the man, and I’ve discussed how he was with his mother. The behaviour didn’t match. He was just an arsehole.’

Dr Lakeki nodded and crossed out the rewritten note, a sigh of relief escaping her. ‘Thank the gods... I would have hated to report a potential outbreak.’

‘An outbreak?’ Stars twitched her ears. ‘What that’s mean? What’s the self-feeding sickness?’

‘Horrible disease,’ Dr Lakeki said, shortly. ‘It’s only carried by nurlak, and symptoms only show in the males. It affects their brain and makes them paranoid and aggressive. Eventually they...’ she hesitated, her eyes flicking from Stars to Little Demon and back. ‘It kills them, if left untreated. Actually, I’d like to make sure you and Little Demon take preventative medication as you’ve been travelling and there’s a chance you may have been exposed.’

A pang of fear squeezed at Stars’ heart. ‘Please. I don’t want him to die!’

‘He won’t,’ Distro promised, answering before Dr Lakeki could. ‘I can make the treatment at home. Ka’harja can, too. He’s very good at it— It’s the first thing I ever taught him!’ there was a burst of pride in Distro’s voice as she mentioned her son, and her confidence helped Stars to relax. ‘We can head back to the markets and get the ingredients we need for it before we go home. How does that sound?’

Stars nodded, a weak smile finding her lips. ‘I would like that very much, Kekik Distro.’

‘Right,’ Distro gave Stars a confident nod and pat on the side. ‘You’re living with alchemists, now, so you don’t ever have to worry about being sick ever again!’

## **Chapter End.**

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