

Chapter 3: Morah 35th, Yieda Year 10,053 AE (The Bathroom Floor; the Nigelle-Beesa House)

Stars was feeling very, very sick.

After leaving Dr Lakeki's office and making their way back to the markets, Stars had thought she'd felt a little bit queasy.... And then, when they'd gotten home, she was sure she was feeling dizzy. So she'd spent the day in bed; needing assistance to sit up to feed her Little Demon when he had cried. Each time Ka'harja helped keep her upright her head would spin and she'd have to close her eyes as her mother held her son in place to feed.

She knew that Dr Lakeki had said she might not feel well as her body processed all of the medications.... But the nature of the nausea she was feeling from the vaccines hadn't *truly* settled in until the next morning, when she'd woken up poor Ka'harja by throwing up all over the bed and, subsequently, him.

She hadn't felt much like being around her family, after that. And they'd respected her wishes. So now she sat on the floor and clung sideways to the toilet, her next few bouts of vomiting having been too projectile to actually make it into the bowl (instead it trailed across the room to the opposite wall), all alone and disgusted by the taste of her own mouth.

She could confidently say that she was having a very bad day.

She felt like she'd been punched in the head. And then the stomach. And then stabbed in the arm. And then punched in the head again.

And by the sounds of her son's wailing, he was feeling very much the same as her.

Slowly, Stars tried to push herself to her feet; but she was so unsteady and weak she barely made it to her knees.

Still, though, she gripped the toilet seat with all four of her arms and with trembling legs forced herself to stand.

Her baby needed her.

He *needed* her.

And she wasn't going to fail him. No matter how much each step towards the main room made her head spin.

She made it to the door and leant against the wall as she looked out to the sparsely-decorated room.

Dena was on the old armchair Distro had found her, rocking Little Demon back and forth and whispering comforting words to him as Distro and Ka'harja sorted through their mail on the nearby table.

They all seemed very focused, but as Stars shifted a floorboard creaked and Ka'harja's ear gave a twitch and he glanced up to meet her eye.

'Stars!' he gasped, hurrying over to help hold the woman steady. 'You shouldn't be walking around—'

'My berr needs me,' Stars interrupted, her tone surprisingly firm through its

nauseous quiver. 'I have to tell him everything is going to be okay.'

An unsure look passed over Ka'harja before he glanced back at his mother and swallowed; the bump in his throat bobbing in a nervous way.

'Not until you're sanitary,' Distro said, twice as firm as Stars had been. 'You've just had your face on a toilet— Ka, Sweetheart, sit her down.'

Ka'harja helped guide Stars to the couch beside Dena's chair as Distro hurried to a shelf and retrieved a jar of clear liquid.

'What is that?' Stars asked, jerking her head back at the pungent alcoholic smell as Distro unscrewed the lid and began lathering Stars' arms in it. 'It's giving me a headache!'

'It's hand sanitiser,' answered Distro. 'It kills germs. I made it myself, so I know it works.... Hold still, now! The sooner I'm done the sooner you can hold your boy.'

Stars, reluctantly, did as she was told and sat still as Distro rubbed the sharp-smelling salve into her skin.

'I don't like this,' she said aloud. 'It smells bad.'

'Really? I like the smell,' replied Ka'harja.

'*You'd like tisi'maar,*' Dena mumbled under her breath; blushing and averting her gaze when everyone in the room looked at her.

Distro gave a humoured snort, then, and released Stars' arm to step over to the very embarrassed-looking Dena.

'Come on,' Distro said as she took Little Demon. 'Give him here. There we go.'

Stars leant forward eagerly as Distro approached, holding out her arms to take her son as quickly as possible. And once she had him she leant back, slipping down backwards until she was lying on the couch with him cradled against her chest.

As soon as he was wrapped in her arms Little Demon's wailing quietened down into an unhappy-but-hushed babbling.

It was like he was trying to talk to her, Stars thought as she met his eye. *But he didn't know how to use words, yet.*

'I know, my little berr,' she said as she leant forward to peck a kiss on his forehead... then she flopped back down with an uneasy spin of her stomach as her nausea returned.

'Oh, don't throw up on the *baby,*' Ka'harja mumbled, his hand finding its way between Stars and her son as if to shield him. 'That won't end well for *anyone!*'

'He needed me,' was the only response Stars could muster. 'He was crying because he needed me.'

The thought panged at her heart.

Her Little Demon had needed her. And she'd almost been too sick to go to him.

But he'd *needed* her! He'd needed her so much he had been wailing and crying for her; only quietening down once he was in her arms.

He loved her.

A warm, wet line fell down Stars' cheek and Distro quickly wiped it away.

'You're a good mother,' she told the nurlak.

'He needed me,' Stars repeated.

'Yes, he did,' Distro confirmed. 'And you came out for him. Even when you're

feeling so miserable, yourself. You're a *good mother*.'

'Yeah!' Ka'harja agreed, his hand finding Stars' head so he could pet her playfully. 'Naw, look at that little fucker. Already falling asleep.... Lucky bastard.'

'We'll leave you two alone,' Distro chuckled, batting Ka'harja's hand from Stars' head before motioning for him to go sit back at the table. 'Dena? Come join us.'

'Join you in what?' the nurlak responded, her eyes tightening suspiciously as she watched the foxens return to their seats. 'Sorting the mail? Distro— You know I can't read.'

'Yes, but you're good company,' Distro replied, pulling out a letter from the pile and huffing. 'Another from the E.D.R, this one looks like it's a list of food banks.'

'Well, it's nice of them,' Ka'harja shrugged, skimming over his own letter and then sliding it over to Distro. 'Another of your clients, they said they're happy to wait for the refund on their order. Eighth Child, I didn't expect this much clean-up. I thought once we got to town it'd be *done*!'

'Well... technically, I could have had the E.D.R settle my client debts...' a deep pink spread across Distro's cheeks, then, and she looked to the floor with a sad and embarrassed look as she trailed off.

Stars saw Distro wring her hands anxiously under the table... and realised she wasn't the only one who noticed it, as Dena got up and hurried over to sit beside Distro; their knees brushing together as they shifted close.

'That's... that's a service they offer,' Distro continued, and Stars saw her take Dena's hand and give it a squeeze. 'But I don't know. It just didn't feel right. I've spent so long building my clients' trust. Letting someone else take over, even for something like this, just.... I don't like the idea of it.'

Another of Dena's hands joined the comforting squeeze, and Distro let out a long breath.

She used her free hand to sift through the mail; and then picked up a small parcel and held it out to Ka'harja. 'It's from Coff,' she told him.

'Coff?!' Ka'harja snatched the parcel with excitement, and began examining it all over. 'Oh! I was so worried he wasn't going to make it to the next town—'

'Why wouldn't he?' Dena rolled her eyes. 'He does it every year!'

'*Shush*,' Distro batted at Dena under the table... and then gently rested her hand on the woman's knee.

Stars felt her ears prick up and twitch at what she saw.

That was a very unusual thing for her mother to allow. *Very* unusual!

Had Distro been doing that before today? Stars tried to recall the two women's interactions. She knew they'd spent a lot of time together, even before they'd gotten to town, but.... *Maybe sharing a bed with Distro had softened her to the idea of Distro touching her? The knee was a very unusual place to touch. Though, maybe that was just where Distro touched her friends?*

But then one of Dena's hands rested atop Distro's, gently thumbing over the little green scales that had grown over her skin, and Stars got the feeling that something about their interaction was different. She thought it looked a lot like how Annanyn would rest her hand on Sken's, when Sken and her sat together at dinner.

‘Well, if I’m going to get an *attitude!*’ Ka’harja gave a humoured scoff and rose from his seat. ‘Then I’m moving to the bedroom to open this!’

‘Oh, Sweetheart, don’t be so dramatic!’ Distro returned the scoff, waving her hand at her son as he made for the stairs. ‘Ka’harja! *Ka’harja!*’

Little Demon let out a babble as Distro raised her voice, and Stars gently ran a hand over his back to comfort him. ‘*Shh*, it’s okay,’ she comforted. ‘You don’t need to be *lenta*. You’re safe. I promise.’

‘Ah, sorry,’ Distro lowered her voice again. ‘He’s alright?’

Stars nodded (slowly, to avoid making herself queasy again) and then let her head lay back down on the arm of the couch. ‘I don’t like feeling *miita* like this. It’s *mup*. The most *mup*. I hate it. At least when my *miita* was bruises I knew how long it would hurt for.’

‘You’ll feel better tomorrow,’ Distro reassured (though Stars thought she saw Dena cast her a doubtful look) before picking up more of her mail and looking through it.

‘You’ve had a reaction to one of the medications, but it’s nothing to be concerned about.’

‘I still don’t like it,’ said Stars. ‘I—’

There was a knock at the door, and Stars cut off to twitch an ear in its direction.

‘Maybe if we ignore them they’ll go away?’ Distro said, humoured.

‘We can hope,’ Dena agreed in a not-so-humoured way.

But then the knock sounded again and Distro heaved a sigh; pushing herself to her feet and making her way over to greet their visitor.

‘Yes, yes! I’m coming!’ she called as she reached the door and yanked it open. ‘Can I help you?’

She was met by a stout foxen man with curly silver-and-black hair and a bright red shirt.

Stars watched him as he faltered, a deep blush creeping over his cheeks as he met eyes with Distro and his previously-confident demeanour turned into a jelly-like nervousness.

‘Yes, uh— Hi, I’m Ketika. Ketika Fio,’ he greeted. ‘M-My husband and I have just moved in next door and, well. He’s at work right now but I thought I might... pop in? Say hello to the new neighbours? I... Do you live here? *You?* I mean I’d heard about you from some people at the tavern but I didn’t realise I’d be next door to... *You* really live *here?*’

Distro took in a deep, deep breath, holding it for a second before letting it out through her nose in a slow and deliberate way. ‘You can ask me *two* questions,’ she said firmly.

‘Did you really call Klic?’ he blurted, and even from the distance Stars thought she could see his eyes sparkling.

‘Yes,’ Distro answered curtly. ‘A Har’py attacked my family, and I shifted to protect them— Keep that in mind when you talk with them, because I won’t tolerate anyone treating them like shit! *Next question?*’

Ketika looked taken aback for a moment, his eyes darting behind Distro so he could look to Dena and Stars. Then, he looked back to Distro. ‘I thought... you were meant to turn back after.’

‘That’s not a question,’ said Distro. ‘But I’ll give it to you for free, anyway; I’ve got *no* fucking clue. The top theory is that it’s because I’m half wolveren.’

‘Oh, that’s why you’re so pale, right?’

‘Is that *really* your second question?’ Distro asked, half shutting the door.

‘What— No!’ Ketika blushed as he held up his hands submissively. ‘I— I’m sorry! I’ve upset you. I can tell. That wasn’t my intention, I.... I’m sorry. I really didn’t expect to see you. *You!* Of all people! I was expecting just a... a regular person as my neighbour —’

Distro shut the door in his face.

‘Kekik Distro!’ Stars gasped. ‘That was very rude!’

‘No, you know what’s rude?’ Distro snorted, her ears pressing back as she looked over to Stars. ‘Saying I’m not a “regular person” and treating me different just because of the way I look! *That’s* rude!’

Stars couldn’t disagree with that; she’d learnt that treating someone differently because of how they looked was very, very hurtful. Annany had explained it all to her, when she’d first met Sken and said some very rude things.

‘*Regular person,*’ Distro grumbled as she returned to the table. ‘*I’ll show him a regular person....*’

‘Maybe he didn’t know it was rude?’ Stars tried. She hoped that their new neighbour wasn’t the sort of person who liked to be *deliberately* rude.

‘*Eeeeh!*’ Distro waved a dismissive hand and sat down heavily next to Dena; hefting herself into the too-tall seat. ‘Too many people don’t know it, in this fucking town.’

Chapter End.

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