

Chapter 4: Yune 1st, Minda Year 10,053 AE (Under Ka'harja's Arm; Bed)

It had been a long, restless night in the Nigelle-Beesa household, and Stars still hadn't managed to fall asleep because she'd been thinking too much.

So many thoughts kept flitting about in her head that she wasn't even sure where to *start* with them. So many thoughts, and all of them confusing ones that made her chest ache and her palms sweat and her head spiral like a spin-top.

She thought of her old troop members. The warriors, like Lah'kort. And Kay'oten. And Reak'nak. And Fre'jar. The ones who would shout and yell and hit and bite. Who made her so scared, and cold, and shaky with their anger and their violence.

And she thought of the others who were treated like her. Who hadn't been able to run away like she had done. Like Zi'na. And Hya'ti. And Al'har. The ones who were still there. Who were still stuck with those scared, shaky, cold feelings.

She wished she could go back and save them all, but she knew there wasn't much she could do. All she'd been able to do was tell that man from the Empire Disaster Relief about them. And though he promised he'd send someone to try and help, he'd seemed doubtful; the program could only help people who were already in the Empire, he'd said. If they were still on Heck'ne land then there was nothing they could do, legally, to save them.

It made Stars' stomach churn with guilt.

Sure, *none* of her troop had treated her well —not even the other low-ranking nurlak wanted to know her, because of her hakalika head— but she still didn't want them to be in pain. She didn't want them to be scared, and lonely, and suffering.

No.

She wanted to save them. To free them.

She wanted them all to experience the wonderful feelings she'd felt, travelling with the caravan.

Hm....

The caravan.

Stars missed the caravan.

Sure. Things were better, now that she lived in Kokako Boaka.

She were clean. And had clothes that fit. And somewhere warm and dry to sleep. The Empire Disaster Relief program had even spoken to the local library and offered to assign someone to help her continue learning to read, if she wanted the help.

And it wasn't just her, either. Little Demon was getting stronger.

Ka'harja and Distro were preparing to start work again.

Even Dena's eyes had a gleam of health to them; one that Stars had never seen before. Not in her whole life.

Things were better in town. Everyone kept saying so, so they had to be!

But... Stars wasn't sure what to think about it. Because, despite what everyone

kept saying about it, things didn't actually *feel* all that much better.

It was like the days were passing them by at a snail's pace. Everyone was restless, and self-conscious, and lonely.

They were all so lonely.

Dena still had no friends.

Distro had to cover her face, just to go to the markets for food (and it didn't even help; people still recognised her and stared in that rude and obnoxious way).

And Ka'harja missed Coff. He spent days at a time pining for him; just waiting for word.... It was something Stars felt all too familiar with.

Oh, she missed Fabecut. She missed him so much.

Why did he have to leave? She let out a sigh. Then, she tensed as another thought poked at her brain. *Why did he leave me behind?*

She sat up, hurriedly, and felt Ka'harja's arm fall from her side as she covered her mouth and shuddered.

Why didn't he take me with him?

The thought gripped her and, though she tried to push it away, it refused to leave her be.

Ka'harja was able to help me. Ka'harja hadn't hesitated, even when he'd had so much more to lose, so why couldn't—

Stars rose to her feet and began pacing, anxiously rubbing her arms as she took in a shaky breath and tried, desperately, to stop her head from thinking those thoughts.

There had to be a reason, she told herself. Fabecut wouldn't have left me behind if he didn't have to. He would have taken me, if he could— He said there was reason he couldn't. Wasn't there? What... what was it, again?

Stars bit her lip, the speed of her pacing increasing as she tried to remember what Fabecut had said to her the night he'd left her.

He was... going somewhere. He was going to... somewhere else. But where? Where was he going?! Why couldn't she remember? Had he even told her where?

Stars heaved a long, heavy sigh as she heard Little Demon give a quiet blubber, and felt all of her negative thoughts fade away as she was distracted by her son. She knew if she didn't feed him he would get louder, then louder and louder, until he woke up everyone. So she made her way to his cot and, feeling her heart flutter with joy as he smiled up at her, picked him up and held him comfortably in her lower arms so she could pull up her shirt and feed him.

Though he latched on, he seemed much more interested in grabbing at her hair.

His grip was getting stronger. Though his legs were still weak as he kicked out and wiggled.... But that was okay.

He wasn't going to be killed for it, here.

Stars liked that thought.

Her Little Demon was safe, here. He didn't *need* to be strong. People would help him, just like people were helping her. *Just like the caravan had helped her.*

Stars felt her mood drop at that thought. Even though it hadn't really been a sad one— It still made her feel sad.

The caravan had been so nice. They had understood her. She didn't feel so out of

place like she did here in town; *here* she felt like she was an outsider, and that everyone was judging her for who she used to be. But in the caravan they had loved her for who she was, and had wanted to help her grow....

She missed them. *Maybe even more than she missed Fabecut.*

Stars rubbed at her face with her free hands, letting out a low groan.

She needed to go for a walk to clear her head. She hadn't been outside since she'd gotten her vaccinations (she'd been far too sick to leave the house) and it was making her feel weird and wrong and upset.

So, still gently cradling her Little Demon, she made her way downstairs and slipped on her shoes.

Shoes.

Shoes.

Shoes were such strange things.

She appreciated them for protecting her feet from the sharp rocks on the town's cobbled paths. But she didn't like that she couldn't feel the grass and the dirt between her toes.

But, then, she wasn't going to be walking on the grass; she was going to stay within the town borders where the stone paths lay. So the shoes would be helpful.

Otherwise the hard rocky ground felt too much like Heck'ne... and that was a familiarity she didn't want, tonight.

Stars pushed the thought to the back of her mind and slipped out into the street. The dim blue light of the soulstone streetlamps illuminated the ground where she walked.

She was halfway to the marketplace when Little Demon unlatched from her breast and gave a happy squeal; reaching for her face.

'*My most mip berr,*' she whispered, lifting him up to kiss his nose. '*Kosson. Kosson.*'

It was a shame the library wasn't open at this hour, she thought. If it was, she could have gone and found a book to read to her Little Demon. Something for them both, to keep both their minds occupied and stave off the sad and lonely thoughts.

Another happy squeal from her son and she lifted him higher; blowing a raspberry on his belly before placing him over her shoulder and patting his back until he burped.

She didn't remove him from the embrace, even after she finished petting him, and held him close as she continued through the streets.

She was glad she had her son. He made everything she'd been through worth it, and she would give him every opportunity she could to make sure he grew up happy.

Even if she had to do it without his yalfit.

She shook the hurtful thought from her mind and continued on; instead trying to focus on a happy memory.

Coborn.

Coborn had been such a good friend.

She would often let Stars sit with her as she cooked; explaining each ingredient and its purpose to the dish as she prepared and added them. She had been so patient, and so soft-spoken, and funny. And she listened to what Stars had to say, genuinely seeming to

care in a way that nobody else had ever cared before.

Oh, she missed Coborn so much.

She missed *everyone* in the caravan.

Coborn. And Annanyn. And Sken. And Baku and Koko. And Felelor, Naranako, and Coff. Trat, and Lif, and Krarf. And she even missed Denni and Tayal and Werani, though she knew they were more Distro's friends than Sken's.

She missed them all.

She missed everyone she'd known....

Fabecut, and Ta'lak, and Al'har, and Zi'na.

She even missed Lah'kort.

The thought was so sudden it made her pause where she stood.

She missed... Lah'kort.

Slowly, Stars closed her eyes and let out a long, sorrowful sigh.

She missed Lah'kort.

'I miss Lah'kort.'

Somehow, hearing what she was feeling aloud helped it not feel so confusing. Like speaking it had untangled it from the mess of thoughts in her head and put it down in front of her to process.

Lah'kort may have been horrible to her, but he was still a part of her family.

He was her father, and her brother (and her uncle, too, her mother had told her). He had always been a constant in her life— Not a pleasant constant, but now that he was gone, things felt so strange and different and *weird*.

She wished he had been kinder to her.

She couldn't understand how he had become what he was. How he could be like the rest of the Har'py troop they had been trapped in. Not when everyone else she had ever known from their family had been so loving.

Stars felt Little Demon wiggle, then, and lifted him off her shoulder so he could look into her eyes and she could see his big beautiful smile.

'*How could anyone with so much of our blood in them be so cruel?*' she muttered; though she wasn't actually asking her son such a hard-to-answer question. Instead, she simply sighed and thought of Ka'harja. 'Well... Kay'oten was awful, too. And Ka'harja is such a nice person. Maybe blood isn't as important as everyone always told me.... Distro doesn't seem to think it's very important at all, and she's one of the smartest people I know.... Hm.... I think she might be right.'

Little Demon, clearly not understanding what was being said, made a grab for his mother's ear and squealed in joy.

Stars let him tug her ear into his mouth, feeling herself smile as she pulled him close and pecked a kiss on his nose. 'You are my most important and mip little berr. I love you. Kosson. Never forget how much I kosson you, my Little Demon.'

She continued her walk, talking to her son as she did.

By the time she had walked around the markets and back home, she had started feeling a little bit better.... But still, she wasn't tired. So she sat on the front step of their house and looked up at the stars.

They weren't as bright here as they had been when she was with the caravan.

She'd read that bright streetlights dimmed the night sky; that was why the town used such low-lit lamps. Enough to light the roads, but not enough that the stars would hide away from sight....

'Hey, you alright?'

Stars twitched an ear, glancing towards the voice that had spoken to her.

There was a man standing at their next door neighbour's gate; a hand on the latch as if he had been halfway through unlocking it before noticing her.

Stars stared at him for a long moment, taking in his dark skin and hair and his slender form hidden under chain-mail, before she sighed and looked back to her son without answering his question.

Little Demon grabbed at her hair, giggling as she gave him a weak smile— And then suddenly the man was sitting beside her.

'Hey,' he repeated, softer this time. 'You alright?'

'Yi,' Stars replied. 'I think so.'

'That's good,' he said, his voice taking on that soft, almost condescending tone that Stars had heard from far too many people since moving to town. 'I'm glad you're alright —'

'I'm not stupid,' Stars interrupted, an impatient edge to her tone. 'I understand what you're saying, so you can talk to me like I'm a person instead of talking to me like I'm an animal who can't speak International.'

'Oh— Uh,' the man seemed taken aback, and quickly glanced around as if looking for the thought he'd lost. 'Right.... Um. Well.... My name's Tenkata Fio. What's... yours?'

'Stars,' Stars answered. 'Beesa.'

'Stars Beesa?' he echoed. 'That's an interesting name.'

'Yi,' Stars replied. 'I chose it carefully.'

'You chose it?' he asked.

'Yi,' Stars confirmed. 'My name used to be something else, back when I was a Har'py. But now it's different. Just like I am.'

'Good different?' Tenkata asked.

'I think so,' Stars answered. Then, when her son kicked out and tugged on her hair, she smiled warmly and offered the infant her thumb to chew. 'I *hope* so.'

They sat together wordlessly for a long moment before Stars cast Tenkata a quick sideways glance.

He looked tired, Stars thought. *Like he'd also been up all night, just like she had.*

But she didn't think too hard on it as she was distracted by her son grabbing at her again and blubbering for her focus.

Tenkata let out a small chuckle, adjusting his chain-mail shirt and putting down his sword on the step beside him. 'It's been a long night, huh?' he said. 'Quiet, thank the gods. Easy work at least.'

Stars' ear twitched, though she didn't look at him. 'Easy work?'

'Mm!' Tenkata nodded. 'Nobody caused any trouble. Honestly, for how big it is here, I was expecting my job to be a *lot* more hectic!'

'What do you do for a job?' Stars asked, looking back up to the man.

He flicked his shirt, as if that should have meant something, and then when Stars

just looked confused he said; 'I'm a guard. Y'know. Keep the peace?'

'Oh.'

'Mm.'

They sat in quiet for a while longer.

Then, Stars had a thought and twitched her ear. 'Tenkata *Fio*,' she said, slowly.

'You live next door, don't you?'

'Yeah, you met my husband?'

'Ketika?' Stars guessed. Then, when Tenkata nodded she pressed back her ears and winced. 'He was very rude to Kekik Distro.'

'Oh?' it was Tenkata whose ears twitched, now. And he frowned as he looked confused. 'Was he?'

Stars nodded. 'Yes. He said she wasn't a "regular person," because she looks different. It's rude to tell people they look different, even if it's true. It's not her fault she looks the way she does. She didn't even mean to call Kliet! It just happened to her, because Kay'oten wanted to hurt Ka'harja and me.'

Realisation hit Tenkata, then, and he mouthed a very quiet oh before a weak chuckle found its way out of him. 'Is *that* why she slammed the door on him, then?'

Stars nodded again. 'Yi.'

Tenkata's chuckle grew louder, and he rubbed at his stubbled cheek. 'Ah. I'm so sorry. He didn't mean to offend her. He was just taken by surprise is all. Didn't expect to see her, and didn't know what to say.'

Stars thought she understood; there were many times she was surprised and said the wrong thing without knowing it was wrong.

But she didn't dwell on it as, when she looked up from her son's beautiful green eyes, she saw the sky above the rooftops was turning a light yellow-blue and blurred; 'The sun's rising.'

'Hm?' Tenkata followed her eyes to the horizon and grinned. 'Oh, yeah. Look at that— That's beautiful, isn't it?'

'Yi,' Stars agreed. 'Very beautiful. The sunrise never looked like that, in Heck'ne. There was too much dust in the air.'

'Was there?'

'Yi...' Stars trailed off, watching the sky. Then, her ears drooped and she felt a sigh escape her. 'It was so different in Heck'ne. Here is so much softer. People are so much more ready to be kind and help each other.... Like Ka'harja, and Distro, and Sken....'

Tenkata gave a tentative nod, clearly not *completely* understanding what Stars meant, but seeming to know she needed to say her thoughts out loud.

'Why did you sit with me?' Stars asked, her ears flicking up as she looked to him.

'Huh? Oh,' Tenkata shifted in place. 'Well. I was worried.'

'You were worried about me?' Stars echoed.

'Of course I was,' Tenkata put a hand on hers. 'I wanted to see if you needed any help. That's all.'

'But you don't even know me!' Stars blurted. Then, she looked to her son again and brushed a tuft of his hair from his eyes as her voice softened. '*Nobody* who has helped me has known me....'

Tenkata paused for a long moment, looking like he was thinking of how to reply *very* carefully, before he lent forward and dropped his focus to Little Demon's smile. 'Maybe we don't know each other,' he said, gently. 'But we share something special.'

'Really? What do we share?'

'The world,' Tenkata replied, simply.

'The world?' Stars twitched an ear. 'But *everyone* shares the world!'

'Exactly,' Tenkata said. 'That's why we have to look out for everyone. Even if we don't know them.'

For a long moment, Stars was quiet. She turned the thought over in her mind, over and over; processing it slowly before finally smiling. 'I like that,' she decided. 'That's a nice way to think about it.'

'Mm,' Tenkata gave a nod.

The look he gave Stars made her hesitate; unsure for a moment if he'd *really* meant what he'd said. But then he smiled, and held out his hand for Little Demon to take, and she was sure just by the look in his eyes as her son played with his fingers that he was a kind person. Even if he said things he didn't mean.

'Would you like to come in and eat breakfast with us?' Stars asked, realising what she'd said only after she'd offered it. 'Ka'harja won't mind making more. Especially if I help him. I like helping him make breakfast. Your husband can eat with us too, if he wants to. As long as he's not rude to Kekik Distro again.'

'I'd love that,' Tenkata said, smiling wide. 'My husband and I have only just moved in, here, so we haven't really had time to make many friends. It will be nice to share a meal.'

'Yi, I know how you feel,' Stars gave a nod. 'We've been here since Jasfe, and we don't have any friends yet, either.'

'That long?' Tenkata asked, his smiling falling in a sympathetic way. Then, when Stars nodded, his smile twitched back to the corners of his lips. 'Well... that just won't do, will it? Though I think I have a solution to *both* our problems.'

'Oh?' Stars twitched her ears curiously at his grin. 'What's that?'

He offered her his hand. 'Friends?'

A moment passed as Stars looked down at Tenkata's hand.... Then she smiled, and took it. 'Yi,' she said. 'I would like to be friends.'

Chapter End.

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