

Chapter 5:
Yune 2nd, Grada
Year 10,053 AE
(Sitting at the Table; the Nigelle-Beesa House)

Stars had been right; Ka'harja hadn't minded making extra food for her guests. He had been more than happy to, in fact, and wasted no time in pulling out the bigger pot and doubling the portions as he *chop chop chopped* away at the various foods before battering them and throwing them into the hot oil.

There hadn't been enough chairs to accommodate six people so, while Ka'harja cooked and Stars set the table and woke their mothers, Tenkata and his husband had gone to retrieve two of their spares from their own dining table.

It was a funny sight, Stars thought. The table they had gotten for the house was bigger than the usual foxen-sized table (it was second hand from the same place where they had found Little Demon's cot, and shared the same sort of peeling paint and aged stains; Distro thought they may have once been owned by the same household) but was still a little too small for Stars and Ka'harja to sit at completely comfortably. So there were two people who were far too large for the table and chairs they sat in, accompanied by two more people who were too small for their chairs in a way that almost balanced it to where they could sit comfortably (once they managed to get into their very-tall seats, that was)— And then there were two more people, whose heads barely poked over the table enough to see their meals as they spoke.

There was a lot of laughter, today, and it made Stars' heart feel lighter than it had in weeks.

Distro and Ketika, despite their previous exchange being so tense, hadn't been able to stop talking enough to get halfway through their meals. Every time Distro would pick up a slice of apple or a fried cricket with her chopsticks, Ketika would say something that would make her cackle hard enough to drop it.

Ka'harja was helping himself to his fourth serving; something that clearly impressed Tenkata, as he stared with wide eyes and a humoured scoff as it was downed in record time and a fifth plate was quickly piled up.

Even Dena, who usually hated company, was smiling as she sat beside Distro and watched her struggle to chew through her hearty laughter.

One of Distro's scale-covered hands met the table, slamming against it repeatedly in her humour before she swallowed and exclaimed, 'You're not serious!'

'I am! I am!' Ketika said with glee as he picked up his cup and held it high as if mock-toasting. 'Oh, she was furious! But, then, that's mothers, for you!'

'Hmp!' Dena scoffed, sounding almost half-agreeable as she finished the last of her plate and shifted, perhaps a little awkwardly in the oversized chair, closer to Distro's side. 'You say, to a room full of mothers.'

Ketika snorted into the drink he had just put to his lips, sending a splash of droplets out in all directions.

'There really *is* no manners in this one's head, huh?' Distro agreed, leaning

sideways towards Dena as if whispering; though she spoke rather loudly and didn't take her eyes from Ketika as he wiped his mouth.

'He's still young,' Dena joked; something rare and surprising, even for Stars' ears. It was quite surprising for the nurlak to hear and she felt her ears twitch to her mother as the woman continued, 'If he doesn't teach himself quick enough, we could always—' she made a motion, as if slapping an invisible person with the back of her hand, '—into him.'

Stars giggled, knowing her mother didn't mean what she was saying at all, and poked at her food with a finger (she wasn't very good with chopsticks yet and, besides that, mostly still preferred to eat with her hands). 'I think he's mip,' she said.

'You think everyone's great!' Ka'harja said, playfully shouldering her.

'Wrong,' Stars corrected, matching her friend's playful energy as she turned her nose to the air in a fake know-it-all expression, just as she had seen Baku do before. 'There are people I don't think are mip.'

'Name them, then,' Ka'harja teased.

'Kay'oten,' Stars said. 'She was the most mup anyone could ever be. She was the mup-est kind of mup that a person can be, I think. And I think that she was a kata'li.'

It was Ka'harja who snorted into his drink this time. Though he didn't bother to wipe himself down.

'Well, it's a good thing that *kata'li* is dead then, isn't it?' Distro said, simply; crunching down on *just* the head of the cricket she held, as if quietly reenacting what she had done in her mind. 'So we're rid of her for good!'

'Are you sure?' Stars asked, watching as Distro swallowed the crushed head. 'There are stories of people coming back after they're dead. A lot of stories.'

Ka'harja just laughed. 'Mum doesn't believe in ghosts.'

'Mm,' Distro hummed, her voice taking on a flat tone that made the entire table fall quiet as she mumbled, '*I didn't believe in gods, either.*'

A long, pregnant pause took hold of the room as Distro put the rest of her cricket into her mouth and chewed on it noisily.

Then Little Demon's babbling sounded from the basket on the couch, and Stars found herself rising to her feet to retrieve him.

She offered him to nurse but, having only recently been fed, he seemed much more content to suckle on the thumb of his wing as he reached out for his mother's face and gave a muffled-but-cheerful *bah-wa* sound.

The silence turned to low chatter and cautious talk of gods as Stars began to coo at her son.

'You are so kama,' she told him, pecking a kiss on his nose to elicit a giggle. 'Farfah kama berr, terr kami mip. TIRR tai kami mip, alik kami farfah berr. Mip, and important. Mip important.'

Ka'harja gave a snort, clearly holding back a laugh as he swallowed and looked away, mumbling an apology before Stars could even think to be offended.

She smiled when she realised what the apology was for, feeling reassured that her friend really *had* been listening to her when she'd said being laughed at upset her. It was clear he was making an effort to respect her. And even if he wasn't good at it, she

appreciated that he was trying.

And she could see from the corner of her eye that Tenkata and Ketika had paid attention to Ka'harja's apology as they bit back their humoured looks and picked at what was left of their meals.

'Tenkata? Do *you* believe in gods?' Stars asked, looking fully to her guests and flicking her ears in curiosity. 'Ketika does, I can tell by the way he looks at Kekik Distro. But I can't tell if you believe or not.'

Seemingly taken by surprise, Tenkata hummed a note through his mouthful of fruit and glanced around before he swallowed and answered, 'Oh, uh— I'm Aurn. Ketika is, too. We both are.'

'Aurn?' Stars' ears twitched again. 'I'm not sure what that is. I don't know many gods, besides the Har'py and Animon ones.... Oh! And I know some of the Okara gods. Krarf is an Okaras, and he taught me.'

'Krarf is an *Okaras*?' Ka'harja echoed, sitting up straighter. 'Huh! I thought everyone in the caravan was Animon.'

Stars shook her head. 'Krarf's not. He's an Okaras.'

'*Huh!*' it was a half-laugh, half-scoff. 'I had no idea— Though, I don't know much about that man.... I don't think he liked me much. I barely saw him the whole trip; pretty sure he was avoiding me.'

'He thinks you're loud,' Stars explained. Then, she turned back to Tenkata and asked, 'What does it mean to be "Aurn"?''

'We believe in the seven goddesses,' Tenkata explained; clearly holding back a chuckle as Stars' ears flicked up alert. 'The goddesses harness the powers of the natural elements— Things like the sun, and wind, and water. They made nature for us mortals to turn into art, and so... we do.'

'I like art,' Stars said, simply. 'They have art at the library. Sculptures and paintings and woven tapestries. My favourite is the painting above the bathroom door. It's a unicorn with a big herd of pegasus. The librarian told me that there's only one unicorn in an entire herd of pegasus. Did you know that?'

Tenkata nodded, his warm smile growing as he did.

'Unicorns are all male,' she recalled. 'And they are the leaders of their herds.... When I was a Har'py, Kay'oten was the leader. And then in the caravan, Sken was in charge. And now it's Distro. And all three of them are women! Which is very different from what unicorns do.'

'Well, people are smarter than animals,' Ketika chuckled. 'Usually, anyway—'

'Who said I was in charge?' Distro gave a loud scoff, and Stars turned to see her crossing her arms. 'I never signed up to be leader of you lot!'

'Na, but you look after us,' Stars replied, simply. 'You keep us safe. And you make sure we have food. And medicine. And you beat Kay'oten in Gra'gahoo da for us.'

'Does it count if I cheated?' Distro sniffed, pushing her now-empty plate away so she could put her feet up onto the table. 'Because, *technically*, you're not meant to use anything but your own physical strength. And I... well. You saw what happened.'

'It's not *supposed* to count if you use magic,' Stars felt her ears flick down as she (slowly and carefully) considered Distro's words. 'So... you *did* cheat, but....'

‘But who in their right mind would have argued with her?!’ Ka’harja gave a loud bark of a laugh and threw his hands up. ‘Not me! Besides. It’s only cheating if someone calls you out on it.’

Distro gave another scoff, and rolled her eyes before looking to Dena. ‘Can you believe this shit?’

‘Yi, I can,’ Dena said, softly; a rare smile finding her lips as she looked to her feet. ‘As Stars said: you make sure we have food. And shelter. And you keep us safe and healthy. That’s what a leader’s supposed to do.’

‘Traitor,’ said Distro in a joking tone. ‘If you *really* thought of me as a leader you’d agree with everything I said, regardless if it was actually true or not.’

The laugh that escaped Ka’harja made Little Demon squeak in surprise, and Stars quickly began to bounce him on her knee to comfort him.

Ka’harja watched her for a moment before wiping his mouth on his bare arm, smearing a line of sauce from his wrist to his inner-elbow. Then he rose from his seat and stretched. ‘I’m gonna go make that order of fairy repellent we got,’ he said as he turned for the kitchen. ‘If anyone needs me I’ll be in the pantry.’

‘The *pantry*?’ Ketika echoed.

‘Yi! That’s where he makes his potions,’ Stars clarified.

‘It’s small and private,’ Distro explained. ‘And the sun won’t ruin the ingredients. I’ve been making potions in pantries for years! And before that it was my bedroom wardrobe— But that was mostly because my father thought studying alchemy was a *poor man’s art* and didn’t want his little *princess* studying it! *Phuh!*’

‘Well, we’re all poor now, aren’t we?’ Tenkata offered with a sheepish smile. ‘In our pockets, anyway.’

‘Eyup,’ Distro picked up her bottle of drink from the table to raise it, and Stars winced as she downed it in one long scull before slamming it back down and burping. ‘That’s why I left my old man behind, you know!’ she continued. ‘Living rich wasn’t worth the emotional poverty. Not that my first mother was much better, mind you. Poor *and* distant! She pawned me off first chance she got, the lazy bitch.’

‘I’m... sorry to hear that,’ Tenkata replied, looking awkward. ‘Abusive parents are —’

‘Eh!’ Distro waved her hand to cut Tenkata off. ‘They weren’t abusive, just set in their ways.... Now my stepmother! Different story. I *love* that woman! Best mum a girl could have asked for! Shame I only met her when I was ten. Would have done me better to have known her sooner, I think,’ she gave a chuckle. ‘Maybe I wouldn’t be so loud!’

Stars twitched her ears, listening to Distro’s story but watching her guests curiously.

They seemed... like they were uncomfortable with the conversation, as Distro continued. Stars could tell by the way they looked at each other; it was the same glance that Sken and Annanyn would always share before telling her that she had said something inappropriate. And so, though Stars didn’t really fully understand *why* they weren’t comfortable talking about Distro’s family, she thought it might be polite to change the topic.

She took the first opening she could:

‘She used to read to me when—‘

‘I read to Little Demon,’ Stars blurted, trying her hardest not to be rude but not knowing how else to interrupt. ‘I need to go to the library and get another book to read to him. Tenkata? Ketika? Do you want to come to the library with me?’

Both men immediately rose to their feet and retrieved their coats from the backs of their chairs.

Chapter End.

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