

Chapter 6:
Yune 2nd, Grada
Year 10,053 AE
(A Corner by a Window; Kokako Boaka's Library)

The library was, despite being such a popular service that was always filled with a significant amount of people, a very quiet and calm place to be.

After making her way to the large and beautiful building with her new friends, Stars had sat down with her son in her favourite sunny corner in order to read to him. Her reading had been slow and clumsy, as was usual, but it had been a relaxing thing to do, especially after such a loud breakfast.

She had, of course, not accounted for the fact she hadn't slept the previous night. And before she even realised she was falling asleep, she was waking up again; one of the library's blankets thrown over her and Tenkata snoozing in the bean bag next to her.

As she slowly blinked awake, Stars realised she could hear her son giggling and turned to look in his direction.

The child was propped upright in Ketika's lap, clapping his hands happily as the man juggled a toy set of oversized wooden keys in the air.

Stars smiled, giving a yawn and rubbing her eyes before she slipped out of her beanbag and onto the floor. She scooted to Ketika's side, taking her son as he squealed and reached out for her.

'Thank you for watching him, Ketika.'

'My pleasure,' Ketika chuckled as he handed the child back to his mother. 'Hefty little tyke, isn't he?'

'Actually, Dr Lakeki is worried because he's underweight,' Stars corrected. 'He's been gaining a bit, but she says that he's still not heavy enough for his age.'

'Ah,' Ketika gave a sympathetic tut and shook his head. 'He's a bright kid, at least. Lots of pep in those eyes of his. I reckon he's gonna live a long, happy life.'

Stars beamed at the comment; it was all she ever wanted for him, was a long and happy life! It was why she had left the Heck'ne, after all.

'Is he your first?' Ketika asked.

'Na... but also, yi,' Stars answered, her tone dropping in melancholy. 'I've had more berr. But never like this, before. All my other berr were born dead.'

'I'm sorry to hear that,' Ketika matched her tone. 'That must have been hard.'

'Yi, it was,' Stars agreed. 'But now I have my Little Demon. And he is the most mip thing that has ever happened to me! He makes me very happy.'

'That's good,' Ketika gave a chuckle. 'Tenkata and I have been talking about adopting for a while. But it's scary.... Especially now.'

'Why especially now?' asked Stars, her ears twitching curiously as her son took her hand to suck on her thumb. 'Did something happen?'

'Well... there was an incident with Tenkata's family,' Ketika gave a nervous cough. 'It's... why we moved.'

'Oh. I understand,' Stars said; reaching one of her free hands to place on Ketika's

shoulder. 'I had to leave my family when I had my Little Demon. If I didn't, they would have killed him. But it still hurt a lot to do. It's hard to leave your family, even when you have to. You both must be very strong.'

'They would have *killed* him?' Ketika looked completely taken by surprise.

'Yi,' Stars answered, simply. 'My brother would have eaten him, because he's half dassen, and tia'fio are not allowed.'

'Oh, wow. That uh—' Ketika cleared his throat with another anxious cough. 'That makes Tenkata's sister stealing my engagement ring look a lot more... *less*.'

Stars didn't know what an engagement ring was, but she knew what stealing was. And she knew how much it could hurt when something you cared about was stolen— So she moved her hand from Ketika's shoulder to his back and gave him a gentle pat before turning to focus on her son.

He beamed up at her when she looked down to him; reaching up and giving a joyful gurgle as he took her hair in his little hands and pulled on it.

Stars leant down, nuzzling into her baby and kissing his nose as he giggled and babbled at her... and Ketika gave a breathless chuckle as he watched the pair.

'He's a cutie,' he said, scratching at his beard with a sheepish grin. 'I, uh.... I don't want to overstep, but...' he paused as Stars twitched an ear towards him attentively. 'But, um.... If you ever need anyone to watch him, I'm home most days. I'd love the opportunity to uh... practice? For when me and Tenkata are ready. But I understand if you don't want a stranger spending time with your kid!'

'That's very nice of you to offer,' said Stars. 'And you're not a stranger; at least not anymore, you're not. You're my neighbour. And you're my friend.'

'Thanks,' Ketika gave another nervous laugh, which was accompanied by a warm smile. 'I honestly haven't had much luck making friends, here. Everyone's nice enough but....'

'Yi, I know,' Stars nodded in agreement. 'Ka'harja said it's because there are too many people here. He said that when there's too many people, you don't know who to talk to, and you see everyone a little bit less, and then they all seem like strangers.'

'Ka'harja said that?' Ketika's tail twitched in humour. 'Really? Him? I mean this in the nicest way, but I didn't exactly peg him as the brightest chunk of stone.... I'm surprised he made that sort of observation.'

Stars just shrugged. 'He can be smart, sometimes. Not always, though. Baku said it's like thinks too fast, sometimes, and then all his thoughts end up fighting with each other instead of turning into proper thoughts, and then he acts like he has no thoughts because of it.'

Ketika just laughed. 'Well, whatever it is, he's good humoured. I like him.'

'I like him too! He's my best friend. And...' Stars hesitated as she recalled the way their mothers had been interacting in the past week. The gentle touches under the table. The short, knowing glances. And the way Dena would *laugh* and look away from Distro with a blush on her cheeks.... And Stars recalled how at night, when she would get up to feed her son, she'd noticed that the pair had stopped sleeping back-to-back in their cramped bed and instead Dena's arms would be hugged tightly around Distro's middle as Distro's face would be buried in her chest. 'I think he might become my brother.'

'Yeah, I got that feeling,' Ketika agreed.

'Yi,' was all Stars replied; though she was glad to know she wasn't the only one who had seen how close her and Ka'harja's mothers had gotten.

There was a peaceful quiet as the pair became distracted by Stars' son and his babbling.

It was like he was trying to tell them a story, Stars thought, nodding along gently as her son clapped and giggled. He clearly had a lot to tell them and, even if she didn't understand him, Stars was determined to do her best to listen; she knew, after all, how much it hurt to be ignored.

So she let her son babble on, speaking soft affirmations back as he did, until he got tired and reached up for her to hug him.

She obliged, resting him against her shoulder and petting his back as he slowly dozed off.

Then, when she was sure he was asleep, she spoke:

'My other friends used to watch Little Demon for me, a lot,' Stars commented, turning back to Ketika. 'Back when I was in the caravan. Annanyn, and Coborn, and Baku, and Coff.... Even Trat would do it, if I asked. But I don't think Trat liked to do it, much.'

'No?'

'No,' Stars echoed. 'He was good at it, though. He took it very seriously.'

Ketika gave an understanding nod. 'It's a serious thing, isn't it? Looking after little ones.'

'Yi,' Stars agreed.

'Yeah,' Tenkata's voice groaned from behind the pair, and they both turned to see him stretch and sit up. 'It's a huge responsibility, isn't it? Must be worth it, though. Just to see him smile like he does.'

'Yi,' Stars felt herself give a giggle. 'Yi. It is worth it. And even if it's hard work, I can't imagine doing anything else for him.'

'You're a good mother,' said Ketika. Then, he glanced to his husband and asked, 'Shall we go?'

'Kekik Distro says that too,' Stars commented, pushing herself up and offering Ketika her hand. 'Sometimes, when I'm all alone, I'm not sure if I'm a good kekik or if I'm a mup kekik. But when Kekik Distro says that I'm mip, I know it must be true. Because she's a mip kekik, too, and she would tell me if I was doing something wrong.'

'She seems like a wise woman,' Tenkata agreed. 'If not a little eccentric.'

'Eccentric?' Stars echoed as she helped Ketika to his feet. 'What's that mean?'

'Unconventional,' Ketika answered. Though, when Stars looked confused he tried again, 'Unusual. Strange.'

Stars slowly nodded, and twitched a curious ear. 'Like... me?'

'Yeah, you're a bit eccentric,' chuckling, Tenkata pet Stars on the back of her leg. 'It's charming!'

Stars felt herself grin. 'Thank you! I—'

'Oh, Stars! I didn't realise you were here,' a familiar voice cut in, and Stars quickly turned to find one of the librarians; a foxen woman who wasn't much older than herself.

Galdu was her name, Stars recalled. They'd spoken on several occasions, and Stars thought she remembered something about her volunteering with the Empire Disaster Relief program— Which was only confirmed, as she continued:

'I'm so sorry! We didn't have an appointment, did we? I was with another patron! If I knew you were here I would have had someone else come out to help you!'

'Oh, no,' Stars gave a polite ear twitch before she shook her head. 'I wasn't here for reading lessons. I was here with friends! This is Tenkata, and this is Ketika. They're married. And my neighbours. They moved into the house next to ours last month! They're very nice.'

'Ah. That's a relief. I thought I'd gotten my calendar wrong in the worst kind of way!' Galdu smiled as Stars motioned to her two new friends, and gave a polite wave. 'I'm Galdu, I work with the E.D.F, in the education department.'

'She helps me read, when I'm having trouble,' Stars explained. 'She's mip at reading— *Good* at reading. And at teaching.'

'Thank you, Stars,' Galdu gave a quiet laugh, before she fixed her hair and politely crossed her arms. 'Is there anything I can help you with, today?'

Stars shook her head again. 'No. We were about to leave. Thank you, though!'

'Well, I hope you had a good time,' Galdu said, politely, before stepping aside to let the trio pass. 'You know you're always welcome here.'

'Thank you, Galdu,' Stars said, adjusting her grip on her son and making for the exit. 'I'll be coming back, tomorrow. There are some new things I want to read about!'

Galdu gave a happy nod, and the group said their goodbyes before heading out.

They made their way into the street and then paused.

'Where should we head off to, next?' Tenkata asked, nudging his husband playfully.

'The markets?' Ketika suggested. 'We need to restock the pantry; we're out of flour *and* oats, and could probably stand to get some duck for the stir-fry, tonight.'

'Oh, yeah, the markets sound fun!' Tenkata agreed. 'I wouldn't mind some more of those cinnamon mealworms.'

'We could pick up some wattle seed tea, too—'

Something hit Stars in the back of the leg and she jumped, giving a squeak of surprise as she turned to face the old foxen woman behind her.

'Oh, sorry, love, may I pass?'

Stars just stared.

She was *old* old. The oldest person Stars had ever seen in her entire life! Even older than her own mother who, until now, was as old as Stars thought people could get. Her dark hair was wiry, with streaks of grey-white running through it, and her skin was worn so loose it hung from her body in a way Stars had never seen skin do before. And she stared straight ahead; not glancing up to meet Stars' eye with her own.

Then Stars noticed, beside the old woman, in a bright red harness, a familiar-looking animal; a flyeater. It was a small creature that stood only as high as a foxen's hip, with large fluffy ears and a long nose and sharp claws.... Stars remembered these creatures from her time in Heck'ne; they fed on the sunflies that flitted through the wasteland and were a valuable food source for the animals that Har'pies hunted.... Though this one had a brighter pelt than the dull-brown of the wild creatures that Stars

was familiar with, and she got the feeling that this was a pet, like Tucker was to Sken.

A long, long moment of quiet passed between the two women as Stars continued to stare.

'Love? May I pass?' the woman asked again; still not looking at Stars.

'Oh!' Ketika gave a gasp. 'Oh, Stars, you need to—'

'Why did you hit me?' Stars blurted. 'I didn't do anything to you!'

'Stars!' Tenkata was at her side, now, trying to usher her to the side of the street. 'Stars, she's blind.'

'That doesn't mean she can hit me!' Stars defended. 'Nobody's allowed to hit me! Not anymore! Kekik Distro said so!'

'No— Stars— She didn't see you!' Ketika corrected. 'She's *blind!*'

'She's still not allowed to hit me!' Stars pressed. 'She hit me with her stick!'

'I'm sorry, love,' the woman said, sounding very genuine. 'I didn't mean to hit you. This "stick" is my cane. I use it to find my way around.'

'By hitting things?' Stars twitched an ear.

'Stars,' Tenkata sounded concerned, now, though Stars wasn't sure why. 'You shouldn't ask questions like that.'

'Why not?' Stars frowned. 'I want to know!'

The woman just chuckled. 'I don't mind questions,' she said. 'I think curiosity is a good thing.... I touch things with the cane, and the cane lets me feel them, so I don't hurt myself by walking into them.'

'Oh,' Stars thought that made sense. 'Because you're blind?'

'Yes.'

'In both eyes?'

'Yes.'

'So you can't see? Not even a little bit?'

'Not even a little bit,' she confirmed.

Stars cocked her head, her face scrunching up in confusion. 'And you're still allowed to live? They haven't killed you for it?'

Stars watched as Tenkata covered his mouth, clearly too stunned to even gasp, and she knew she'd said something rude.

'I've said something rude,' she said the thought aloud. 'I didn't mean to be rude. I just want to understand. Back in Heck'ne, when people went blind, they would die. They'd either be left to starve, or they'd get killed and eaten. Nobody got old like you are.'

'Ah, you're from the *Heck'ne*,' the woman's surprised look turned to one of understanding. 'Well that explains the accent, doesn't it?'

'I have an accent?'

Both Tenkata and Ketika visibly relaxed, as the woman smiled warmly.

'Yes,' she answered, simply. 'I thought it sounded familiar. I've only met one other Heck'nerian, before. Lovely young girl, she was. A nurlak who'd run away from home and joined a caravan of travelling avio.'

'I'm a nurlak,' Stars said. 'And I also ran away from home and joined a caravan. But they weren't avio. They were foxen and secas.'

'What a wonderful coincidence!' the woman beamed. Then, she chuckled and held out her hand to Stars; who had to crouch down to take it. 'Oh, I don't think I've introduced myself, have I? I'm Krif. Krif Tennell. And this is Tin, my service animal.'

'Sken had a service animal,' Stars commented. 'An incarrah named Tucker. He was to help her with P.T... S.D? Is that why you have Tin?'

'Tin helps me find my way around,' Krif explained. 'She's a good little thing. Makes sure I don't fall down any stairs or walk in front of moving carts. She was supposed to open doors, too, but she has a bit trouble with that— Don't you, Tin?'

Tin gave a snuffling sound and stepped closer to Krif's side; pressing into it as if to make sure she was aware of her presence.

'*Good girl,*' Krif muttered. 'And what would your names be? I heard three of you!'

'Oh! I'm Stars,' Stars answered. 'And these are my friends, Tenkata and Ketika. They're married.'

'That's lovely. Part of that caravan?'

'No, I don't travel with the caravan, anymore,' Stars explained; feeling a pang in her heart as she thought of the friends who'd left her behind. 'Me and my kekik and my berr all stayed here, with my friend Ka'harja and his kekik.'

'Kekik and berr, what do those two words mean?'

'Mother and baby,' Stars answered.

'You have a baby?' Krif lit up. 'Another coincidence— The nurlak woman from the other caravan, she also had a baby! A little half-harpy girl.'

'My son is half dassen,' Stars felt herself laugh.

'Oh, how precious,' Krif chuckled. 'What's his name?'

'Little Demon,' Stars said.

'Ah, the other nurlak called her daughter Ze'I,' said Krif. 'I believe she said it was Avio for "Little Treasure"? But I could be misremembering.'

'Hey, Stars?' Ketika spoke from behind Stars, and she turned to her friend. 'I don't want to be rude; but Tenkata and I need to head off. You're welcome to stay and talk, but.... Will you be alright on your own?'

'Oh, yes, I will!' Stars stood straight, now, and gave a happy nod. 'I come to the library on my own all the time! I know the way home from here.'

'As long as you'll be fine,' Ketika pet her leg, before hooking a hand around his husband. 'We'll see you around, shall we?'

'Yi!' Stars agreed. 'You're always welcome to come over and talk!'

'And you're always welcome at ours,' Tenkata returned. 'You have a good day, Stars.'

'I will! And I hope you have a good day, too, Tenkata. And you too, Ketika.'

The two men waved, and then were off; disappearing into the crowd as Stars called out another goodbye.

'They seemed nice,' Krif commented.

'They're very nice,' Stars confirmed, turning back to Krif. 'I like them.'

'Lovely, lovely...' Krif gave another laugh. 'What are your plans for the day, my dear?'

'Um.... I'm not sure. What day is it?'

'I believe it's the second,' answered Krif. 'Grada.'

'OH!' Stars covered her mouth, her eyes going wide. 'The second?! Oh! I need to go home! The second is when Metita visits! He's from the E.D.R! I'm supposed to talk to him!'

'Ah, well, go on now! Don't let me keep you!' Krif waved a hand, motioning for Stars to go. 'Hurry home, love!'

'Yi! Yi! I will!' Stars exclaimed, hurrying around Krif so she could make her way home. 'Thank you for answering my questions, Krif! Even though they were rude. I hope you have a good day! Bye!'

Chapter End.

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