

Chapter 7:
Yune 2nd, Grada
Year 10,053 AE
(Two Streets from Home; Kokako Boaka)

Stars had hurried home as fast as she could without waking her son; a walk so fast some might have mistaken it for running, if they were only looking from the corner of their eye.

She was lucky that the townsfolk, seeing her rushed look, mostly moved aside for her to let her past. She thanked as many of them as she could, but she was in such a hurry she knew that not all of them heard her. A shame, as she couldn't turn back to make sure they did.

Though she was out of breath she kept up the pace. She knew she was close to home, now; just two more turns, and she would be in her street!

'Stars? Stars, wait!'

Stars stopped at the familiar voice, breathing a sigh of relief as she turned to face Metita. He was in his usual uniform; with his shirt tucked under his belt and his deep green hair tied back in a messy bun. The E.D.R badge pinned to his chest reflected a sparkle of sunlight as he looked up at her with tired eyes and adjusted his heavy-looking bag on his shoulder.

'Stars, are you alright?'

'Oh! I was sure I was going to be late to meet you!' Stars blurted as the foxen man reached her side. 'I was all the way at the library, and I didn't know today was today until Krif told me! I'm sorry! I'm *so* sorry that I was almost late!'

'It's alright,' Metita reassured, his hands hovering by her leg in a comforting way— Though he refrained from actually touching her, instead taking a deep and calming breath that was a clear cue for Stars to copy. 'Deep breaths, now. You wouldn't be in trouble for being late.'

'Lah'kort would have been angry!' Stars blurted. 'He would have hit me!'

'Lah'kort isn't in charge of you anymore,' Metita reminded her, motioning now with his hand for her to take a breath. 'We're here to help you, not punish you. Take a deep breath. You're not in trouble.'

Stars took the breath, and let her shoulders fall slack as it helped loosen the tight knot in her chest that she hadn't realised had been forming.

'There we go. Is that better?' Metita asked, mirroring Stars as she nodded. 'Good. Good. There we go.... No harm done, hm? We're both right on time.'

'Yi,' Stars took another deep breath and let it out, adjusting her son in her grip as he gave a tired murmur and fidgeted. 'We can walk together, can't we?'

'Yes, that does sound good, doesn't it?' Metita smiled warmly as he motioned for Stars to lead the way. 'You can tell me all about how that doctor's appointment of yours went. It says in my notes you received some vaccinations?'

'Yi,' Stars confirmed, starting her way home at a much slower pace than she had been walking before. 'Dr Lakeki had a lot of vaccinations, for me and for my Little Demon. They were awful.'

'Awful?' Metita echoed.

'Yi,' Stars folded down her ears, giving Metita a mournful look. 'They miita a lot — Um. I mean. *Hurt* a lot. And made us both feel very sick. Dr Lakeki said they were

to help us stay healthy and mip, but.... I didn't like them. Not at all.'

'I'm sorry to hear that,' said Metita, softly. 'Though, I am glad you still got them. Vaccines are very important things.'

'Yi... Yes,' Stars said, and saw Metita twitch his ear as she corrected her wording. 'Dr Lakeki told me about them and why it was important to get them.... I still don't like them, though.'

'Mm,' Metita acknowledged Stars with a hum. Then, he glanced up at her, just for a moment, with a reassuring look. 'Your International is getting better. I can hear the improvement in your pronunciation.'

'I've been trying, but sometimes I forget,' Stars said. Then, after a moment, she sighed. 'A woman said I had an accent, today. Do I have an accent?'

'Everyone has an accent,' Metita answered. 'Yours is just different from the common one, here. It's nothing to worry about.'

'I don't like sounding like a Har'py,' Stars admitted. 'I don't want to be a Har'py, not anymore, and I don't want people to think I'm a Har'py when they look at me! I want to be like everyone else! I... I want to be normal. I don't feel *normal*.'

'I understand,' Metita told her, his voice soft with empathy. 'Most people I work with express the same sentiment at some point or another...' he paused, then, to take Stars by the hand and squeeze it comfotingly. The professional air that clung to him seemed to melt, just a little, as he looked at her with a soft, sympathetic gaze. 'I think feeling like you'll never be normal might be one of the most normal feelings in the world, Stars.'

A moment passed between them, quiet and understanding, before Little Demon gave a babble and Stars felt his toothless mouth close over her ear.

Metita took a deep breath and his professional demeanour returned as he released Stars' hand and continued on.

Stars followed him quietly, after that; not saying anything until they had arrived at her front door and she opened it to announce herself:

'Kekik! I'm home!' she called, only to realise she didn't have to shout, as both Dena and Distro were laying on the couch together.

Distro was asleep with her face buried in Dena's chest as Dena rested underneath her and rubbed a hand along the curve of her back. Distro's tail was entwined around Dena's leg, loosely, though it was quickly shaken loose as Dena jolted in surprise as Stars entered the room. Dena looked at her daughter with wide eyes before shoving Distro onto the floor and stumbling to her feet.

Distro mumbled something, but otherwise didn't seem to notice that she was now laying on her boots, and continued to sleep.

Dena shuffled in place for a moment, her nerves clear, before she stepped over Distro and hurried to her daughter. She embraced Stars, who crouched down to hug her back, before letting out a long breath and rubbing the back of her neck with a hand.

'How was your day?' she asked, not meeting her daughter's eye but instead letting her gaze trail her grandson as he reached out for her and babbled. 'Did you have a good time?'

'Yi, Kekik,' Stars answered. She pecked a kiss on her mother's cheek before, gently, offering Little Demon to her.

Dena took the child without another word and retreated back to the couch, placing him in her lap so she could make playful motions with her hands while leaning

him back against her chest.

He loved it; squealing in joy and grabbing at Dena's hands with his own and pulling her fingers into his mouth to chew.

'Is Distro alright?' Metita asked from behind Stars, and Stars stood up straight before turning to him and twitching an ear. 'She's... just...' he waved a hand, motioning towards the sleeping woman, and winced.

'She's a heavy sleeper,' Stars answered, stepping over to Distro and tapping her on the head. 'Kekik Distro? It's time to wake up. Metita is here!'

There was no response, so Stars tapped her harder and spoke louder— Then, when there was still no response, Distro was rolled onto her back.

This seemed to annoy her, as she rolled back onto her side.

'Kekik Distro, you have to get up!' Stars said, loudly. 'Metita is here, and you know that he needs to talk to us!'

'*Metita can fuck off,*' Distro mumbled; much to the man's amusement.

Ka'harja made his way downstairs then, holding a deep green apple in one hand and a hamper of dirty washing in the other. With a quick glance of the room he seemed to gauge the situation and stepped over to his mother; dumping the hamper down noisily and giving her a soft *thwap* around the ears.

'Up!' he ordered, sharply.

When she simply grunted in annoyance and didn't comply, he took her by an ankle and hefted her up; dangling her in the air as she let out a shriek of surprise grabbed at her son.

'Ka'harja!' she exclaimed. 'I've told you a hundred times not to swing me around!'

'And I've told *you* a hundred times to put your socks in the clothes hamper,' he retorted, placing her face-first onto the floor and letting her fall into a heap. Then he looked over to Metita and loudly took a bite of his apple. 'Hey, Metita.'

'Good afternoon, Ka'harja,' Metita replied, clearly trying to smother a chuckle. 'How have you been?'

'Aw, yeah, surviving,' Ka'harja answered through his mouthful. 'You?'

'I've been fine, thank you,' Metita responded, before motioning to the table. 'Shall we sit?'

'Yeah, sure!' taking another bite of his apple, Ka'harja stepped over his mother as she waved an annoyed hand at him and took his usual seat. He pulled out the chair beside him and, looking over at Stars, *thwacked* a hand down on it noisily; smiling wide when she understood and hurried to sit with him.

'Oh, I see how it is!' Distro teased as she took the seat opposite. Then she gave a loud sniff, wiping her nose on her sleeve, and turned to Metita as he sat down. 'So? What's on the agenda for today?'

'Good things!' Metita responded, hefting his bag onto the table and pulling out a clipboard and pen. 'I already spoke with Stars about her vaccinations outside, so that's all confirmed and we can contact Dr Lakeki about payment...' he scratched a note beside one of the many items on his list, before giving an approving nod and motioning to Ka'harja and Stars in turn. 'Now. We have gotten ahold on *one* suitably sized bed for the two of you, which we can have delivered tonight, but there's no E.T.A on a second.'

'Aw, man! You mean we're going to have to *fight* over it?' Ka'harja joked, giving

Stars several friendly pokes that made her giggle. ‘Grr! Arg! Fight fight! My bed!’

‘Ka’harja!’ Stars laughed, batting his hands away. ‘We can share it!’

‘No, we have to fight,’ Ka’harja said with a grin. Then, when Stars gave him a playful shove, he deliberately slipped off his chair and splayed out on the floor. ‘Oh! Oh! You beat me! Mercy! You can have the bed!’

Stars gave another giggle and then, to her surprise, she heard a chuckle from her mother and turned to watch as the older woman shook her head at Ka’harja and scrunched up her face in humour.

‘Oh! *That’s* rare!’ Ka’harja explained, pointing at Dena. ‘Am I growing on you?’

‘Yi. You’re like a wart,’ Dena answered; her tone sounding almost affectionate as she looked back to Little Demon and nuzzled into him. ‘*Isn’t he? He’s a wart!*’

Little Demon, despite not understanding what was said to him, let out a happy squeal and clapped his hands.

‘You know what? I’ll take it!’ Ka’harja laughed, flopping back into his seat. ‘So. New bed! What’s next?’

‘Yes, what’s next?’ Distro asked, folding her hands together and leaning forward. ‘Do you have any news from the I.H.A?’

‘Yes! Fantastic news,’ Metita said, pulling out a small package from his bag. ‘They managed to confirm your membership and have sent through updated certification for you to display, if you choose to open another shop or a clinic.’

‘I.H.A?’ Stars echoed curiously.

‘International Healer’s Association,’ Ka’harja answered as Metita began sifting through a pile of documents with Distro. ‘Basically, it’s a group of people who can vouch and say, “Yeah, she’s trained to make medication.” So that people buying potions know that she’s going to be good at it, and isn’t just throwing a bunch of crock together. I mean, you can still sell potions without a membership, but people are more likely to buy them if you have one.’

‘Oh, that makes sense. I think,’ Stars replied. ‘Are you a member, too?’

‘Nah, I can’t join until my training is done,’ Ka’harja answered. ‘Which, you know. I’m getting there. But not quite yet. Maybe three? Four more years? Then I can look into joining.’

Stars nodded along, not completely comprehending what Ka’harja meant but knowing enough about his work as an alchemist to half-understand what he was talking about.

‘Ah! Ka’harja, speaking of your training,’ Metita cut in. ‘You remember how last month we discussed that your training was on hold?’

‘No,’ Ka’harja answered, simply. ‘But go on.’

‘Ah, well... we discussed that while Distro organises her new store and stock, she wouldn’t be able to handle your training,’ Metita clarified. ‘And you agreed to let us look for alternate employment for you, until your mother had a stable client-base again.’

‘Uh— Huh. I agreed to that?’ Ka’harja shrugged, grinning as he leant back in his chair. ‘I don’t remember. But, then, I don’t remember a *lot* of things!’

‘Mm,’ Metita gave a hum, before holding out a small stack of papers to Ka’harja. ‘We found you a job.’

‘Aw, yeah,’ Ka’harja’s chair *clunked* against the floor as he let it fall back onto all four legs, and he took the papers to flick through them. ‘What’ll I be doing?’

'You'll be an assistant for a local seamstress,' Metita explained. 'Simple work, only a few hours a day. She's recently sustained an injury and needs someone to help maintain her store. Keeping shelves stocked and cleaning, mostly, as she's lost the mobility needed for it. She's an anvora woman named Fetel Wir; I think you'll get along well with her.'

'Right,' Ka'harja gave an agreeable nod. 'I can do that.'

'An anvora woman?' Stars said aloud. 'They're one of the Rendi races, aren't they? Like harpies and avio?'

'Yeah,'

'I've never met an anvora, before,' Stars said. 'I've only heard about them. Du Doria was one of Zen'efay's sisters. She turned the seeds from berries into eggs, to make the anvora. Did you know that?'

'I did,' Metita confirmed, politely. 'And did you know that an anvora was the first recorded person to ever survive a basilisk stare?'

'I didn't,' Stars said, her ears twitching curiously. 'Really?'

'Their name was Des Davanti,' Metita told her. 'Very interesting stuff. You should look it up next time you're at the library.'

'I will!'

Metita gave her a happy nod, then looked back to his paperwork. 'Now, Ka'harja. I want you to keep in mind that Fetel Wir won't be paying you directly,' he commented. 'Your wage is being subsidised by another organisation called International Disability Independence and Support. Sometimes called the I.D.I.S.'

'Yeah, I've heard of them,' said Ka'harja. 'They helped with my rehabilitation when I was a kid.'

Stars hadn't heard of them, and she was very curious as to what exactly they were; but she wanted to be polite and tried to hold her tongue, resisting the urge to interrupt.

'Ah, yes, your leg injury,' Metita acknowledged. 'That shouldn't affect your ability to work, should it?'

'No, it—'

'Little Demon's legs don't work properly,' Stars blurted, unable to keep herself quiet any longer. 'Dr Lakeki says he might not ever walk.'

Stars immediately regretting interrupting. However Metita, rather than getting angry at the interruption like Stars worried he would, simply took a small folder from his bag and flicked through the papers inside.

'Oh, yes, it says here...' he mumbled. 'Application forms.... Yes! Dr Lakeki's made a note that she wants us to put him forward for I.D.I.S support. We can talk about that when I'm done with Ka'harja, hm? We'll make sure he's looked after, don't you worry.'

Stars nodded, grateful that Metita was so patient with her.

'Alright,' he said, softly, before turning back to Ka'harja. 'Now, you'll be a shop assistant, not a personal assistant; so your duties shouldn't include any personal errands. Only shop-work. Do you understand the difference?'

'Yeah,' Ka'harja gave a nod. 'Stacking shelves for her, but not buying her lunch.'

'Good, good,' Metita made a note on the paperwork, before turning it around to Ka'harja. 'Read over this and sign it.'

Ka'harja immediately went to sign, and Metita blocked his pen with a hand.

'Ka'harja,' he said, seriously. '*Read* it before you sign.'

'But I hate reading,' Ka'harja complained.

'It's a legal document, you *need* to read it,' Metita heaved a sigh and shook his head. 'I hope you haven't been signing things without reading them, first.'

'Uh...'

'I like reading, though I'm still not very good at it,' Stars blurted; then, she bit her lip when she realised she'd interrupted. 'Sorry.'

'That's alright,' Metita reassured, before he turned back to Ka'harja and tapped the paper seriously. 'Please, Ka'harja. *Read* through it. *Thoroughly*.'

Ka'harja gave an exaggerated sigh and picked up the document, slowly scanning it over.

That was when Metita turned to Stars. 'Now, before we get into Little Demon's I.D.I.S application, is there anything you're wanting to address?'

Stars bit her lip, twitching her ears and thinking hard about that question. 'Do...' she hesitated, then her brow furrowed. 'Do I need to get a job like Ka'harja?'

'No. At least, not just yet,' Metita answered. 'Do you remember the second time we met, and you filled out all those assessment forms? I believe we spoke about those results?'

'Yi... yes,' Stars said, a sheepish look on her face. 'I didn't really... understand what a lot of it meant, though.'

'Ah, well, I apologise that it wasn't clear,' Metita flicked through more of his documents. 'If you're ever confused by any of this, you can *always* ask for clarification. It's important that you understand what we're doing. Otherwise we can't help you properly. Yes?'

Stars nodded.

'It was agreed that, due to your circumstances as a new mother and Heck'ne immigrant, it would be best to focus on your son and your education before we tried to find you any sort of work,' he read off a sheet. 'The priority, before your employment, is creating a stable environment for Little Demon to be raised in. Do you understand what that means?'

'Um...' Stars blushed, flicking back her ears as she tried to put the explanation together. 'I... don't think I do.'

'They're saying you *already* have a job,' Distro gave a loud sniff and put her feet on the table. 'Your job is being a mother and looking after Little Demon. And part of that is learning how to do things like read and write, so that you can help teach him when he's old enough.'

'Oh. Okay,' Stars' ears flicked up, and she gave a relieved sigh. 'I think that I can do that.'

'Course you can!' Distro scoffed. 'You're a good mother.'

A smile found Stars' lips, and she let out a long breath. 'I am a good kekik,' she repeated for herself.

'I agree,' Metita commented, gently. 'You're a very good mother. I always look forward to seeing you and your son in these meetings.'

'You do?' Stars asked.

'Yes,' Metita's ears flicked up, and his tired smile creased the corners of his eyes as he took Ka'harja's now-signed forms. 'At the risk of sounding unprofessional.... Sometimes this job exposes me to rather depressing family situations. But seeing the

effort you put in for your son is uplifting, and helps to make the rest of my month easier to bear.'

It was a strange thing to hear.

Her entire life Stars had, as far as she knew, been the one that everyone tried to avoid. The one that got ignored, and that got groaned at with rolled eyes when she would try and join in conversations.

She had never been good at things, or a person that others looked forward to seeing. So hearing Metita say that she made him feel *better*...

It made her feel good in a way she'd never felt before. In a way that she couldn't place or explain; like she was finally doing things right.

'Actually, on that note,' Metita mumbled, looking at his papers. 'We still haven't found any childcare facilities that are able to meet Little Demon's needs. At least, none with any vacancies. However, we *are* able to help with other options, such as private babysitters, if you find yourself needing a break.'

'Ketika said he can babysit,' Stars said. 'He lives next door with his husband.'

'Did he? That's very kind of him,' Metita acknowledged. 'Is Ketika a friend of yours?'

'Yi, he is,' Stars agreed. 'He said that he wants to have his own kids, one day. Tenkata and him want to adopt. And he said he would like to practice by looking after my Little Demon, if I was okay with it. And I am okay with it. Because he's my friend, and I trust him.'

'I'm happy to hear you're making friends,' Metita gave a warm, genuine smile. 'It's important to build a support system.... Now, about the I.D.I.S application,' Metita pulled some documents forward, placing them in front of Stars so he could point at them with his pen. 'Dr Lakeki has filled in the majority of the information for us. But there are still some things for me to handle. I've filled these out before, and I can do most of it without asking you *too* many questions. But I will still have a few. And I *will* need your consent to fill it out on your behalf.'

Stars twitched an ear. 'But... if it's for Little Demon, why do you need *my* consent? Shouldn't you ask him, instead?'

Ka'harja smothered a laugh, hurriedly apologising, before rising to his feet and quickly busying himself with taking the dirty clothes hamper to the bathroom.

Stars watched him go, before turning back to Metita and repeating herself. 'Shouldn't it be Little Demon's consent?'

'I understand what you're asking,' Metita said, softly. 'But Little Demon is too young to understand this sort of thing. So, when someone is too young and not able to understand consent, it's up to their parents—in this case you—to provide that consent on their behalf. You are his caretaker, and you have his best interests in mind, and so *you* decide what can and can't happen to him.'

'Oh, that makes sense,' said Stars. 'Um... yi. Yes. Yes. You can.'

Consent given, Metita began to fill in the necessary forms for Stars and her son; taking his time to explain each part as he filled it in, and what it all meant.

Stars wasn't sure she understood everything, completely, but she was grateful that Metita took the time to make sure she knew what was being written. It meant a lot, that he gave her the opportunity to understand, and didn't just assume she wouldn't like so many other people always did.

And she made sure to tell him as much, as he worked; which he responded to with a warm smile and a chuckle before moving on to the next page.

But that was when he paused, looking unsure as his pen hovered over a line on the document.

'Are you okay, Metita?' Stars asked.

'Mm... yes, I'm fine,' he said, almost absently. Then, he took on a serious tone. 'I need to ask you some very important questions, Stars, to help with the application. But I understand if they're too stressful to answer. If you can't answer them, please tell me.'

Stars' ears twitched at the seriousness in Metita's tone, and she shifted as she saw her mother from the corner of her eye; the woman was looking at Metita with sharp eyes and a distrustful expression. Though, her gaze shifted to Distro as the woman hefted herself out of her chair so she could sit on the table, dangerously close to Metita's paperwork.

'What's all this about serious questions, then?' she asked, waving a dismissive hand at the bathroom door and drawing attention to the fact that Ka'harja was standing half-out the room with damp clothes in his hands, eavesdropping. She then took the form from Metita, who heaved a sigh at her bad manners, and read the line he had been hovering over. 'Ah. They want details about his father.'

'Fabecut?' Stars mumbled, all of the good feelings she had just been feeling suddenly draining from her and being replaced with a heavy pebble of anxiety in her chest and a bubbly and tight feeling in her stomach. She wasn't sure why that feeling came over her, at the mention of her son's father; they had been in love, hadn't they? They'd cared for each other. He'd never hit her, at least....

'Yes, this "Fabecut" man, you've mentioned him a few times,' Metita acknowledged; his eyes tightening in the same suspicious way that Dena's had as he watched Stars. It was clear that he had seen her tense, as she'd said Fabecut's name, and the look he gave was almost disapproving. 'Where is he? Was he one of the Har'pies you lived with, previously?'

'Na.... I mean, no,' Stars mumbled, wiggling uncomfortably in her chair as she felt everyone's eyes on her. 'He wasn't a Har'py. He stayed near the border, because he was travelling near the Heck'ne, and we would meet. Until he had to leave.'

'I see,' Metita took the document back from Distro, hovering his pen over it again in preparation to write. 'And you didn't leave with him?'

'No,' it came out as an almost-whisper, and Stars brought her hands into her lap, fiddling with them nervously. 'He had to leave me behind. He said there was a reason. I mean, I *think* he did? He said that he was going somewhere else. But I don't know if he... ever told me where.'

'I'm sorry, I'm not meaning to make you uncomfortable, I just want to understand. *Need* to, for my report. And for your son's application,' Metita sighed. 'So the relationship with him wasn't a close one? Was it only sexual?'

'No, he said he loved me.'

'But he didn't try and help you leave Heck'ne?' Metita's tone was curt, now; clearly disapproving, and Stars felt that sickly pebble sink lower as he heaved a sigh. 'He loved you, but he did *nothing* to help you?'

'He said there was a reason,' Stars mumbled, feeling her ears press down. 'He *must* have. I don't know why I don't remember.'

Metita took another sheet of paper — a different one, to Little Demon's application— and began to write something down. 'May I be blunt, Stars?' he asked as he wrote.

Stars glanced from Metita, to Distro, to Dena, to Ka'harja, and then to her own feet. 'Yes,' she managed.

'It sounds, to me at least, that Fabecut took advantage of you,' he said, before he tore what he had written from his paper. 'Here,' he held it out for Stars. 'This is the address of a local brothel. They offer counselling for sexual trauma. I think, even if you don't see with them for Fabecut specifically, it would benefit you to talk to them about the things that happened to you in Heck'ne.'

Stars simply nodded, taking the paper without meeting Metita's eye.

She didn't like the thought that Fabecut may have taken advantage of her. At the time he had seemed so nice, and kind, and loving....

But that was before she'd met the caravan. And, now, compared to them, everything he'd said seemed so....

So....

She didn't want to think about it.

'It also has a free health clinic,' Metita continued, his voice growing softer. 'If you haven't found a doctor for yourself already, I think you should visit their clinic and ask to be tested for sexually transmitted diseases.'

Stars simply sighed, mumbling that she would contact them, and watched as Metita moved back to filling out Little Demon's application.

'Hm.... I assume you don't know any of Fabecut's medical history?' he asked, his voice full of sympathy as Stars shook her head. 'I didn't think so.'

Chapter End.

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