

Chapter 8: Yune 5th, Minda Year 10,053 AE (The Eatery; Lady Batinki's Brothel)

It was a rainy day outside. The sound of the pitter-patter against the roof was mostly drowned-out by quiet conversation as people sat at their small tables and ate their meals.

The heavily-frosted glass windows let in the light (not that there was much light to let in, with the clouds over the sun) while obscuring the view of the street outside; something that seemed to be appreciated by the others in the eatery as they sat, mostly unclothed, to enjoy their meals with like-minded people.

Overall, the atmosphere of the room was a cheerful one; though Stars couldn't seem to stop trembling.

She reached for her sauce packets, dropping them twice before Ketika leant forward and helped her with her food.

'You're alright,' he told her, gently, as he pet her hand with his own.

She didn't *feel* alright. Though, somewhere deep inside she knew it was true.

She hadn't known what to expect, coming in to see a therapist as Metita had recommended.

She had been assigned to a Dr Kiti Kamaras; though she had told Stars to simply call her Kiti.

The session had been intense, though Kiti had kept her calm as she recounted her life in Heck'ne; the abuse, the fear, the lost children. It had been a very long two hours. Stars thought it was maybe the longest two hours she had ever been through. And by the end of it she hadn't even brought up half of all she'd experienced; she hadn't even mentioned Fabecut. And she had only brushed lightly over Ka'harja's escape, and even then it had only been a side-note as she'd spoken about the aftermath. How her sister had used the opportunity to run away, herself, and how Kay'oten and Lah'kort's anger had become so much worse after that day.

Though Stars had thought she felt fine immediately after the session had finished, she had been advised to stay a while longer in the building, just until her nerves calmed themselves that last little bit. She was glad she had listened to the advice; as it was about five minutes after she'd left the therapist's office to sit in the lounging room with Ketika, that everything that had been said caught up with her, and she'd broken down in tears.

She had wished Ka'harja was there. He had become very good at calming her down, and she always felt safe when he was with her. And though she felt guilty that she'd asked for him out loud, when Ketika had gone out of his way to bring her to her appointment, her friend didn't seem to mind and hadn't been offended. Instead, he'd seemed to understand, and reassured her that she could talk to Ka'harja when he returned home from work— It was his first day, after all. She could ask him all about it and the things he'd learnt.

She had to admit, it was something she was looking forward to....

But for now, having only just managed to calm herself, she and Ketika sat together eating lunch.

The thing, Stars thought, that hit her the hardest, were the simplest statements

her therapist had spoken:

It was not your fault.

You didn't do anything to deserve that.

You deserved to be treated better.

It was strange to hear somebody tell her that the things that had happened to her weren't her fault.

She wasn't sure how to process the information; so she tried to put it to the back of her mind as she ate.

The food was nice, at least. It was some sort of pastry, filled with apple and cinnamon. She'd been told the crust was made with mealworm flour— Though the crust barely tasted different from the mushroom and wheat flour bread that Distro had made the night before. The entire pastry was a strange mix of earthy and sour, with a tangy sauce on the side (though, Ketika had helped her pour it on top of her food) to act as a mild in-between for the two powerful flavours.

Though she was provided with a fork Stars found it easier, with her shaking hands, to simply pick at her lunch with her fingers. Nobody around them seemed to mind, and Ketika didn't comment, so she scooped more of the pastry's filling onto two fingers and licked it off.

As she did she heard a babble from her side, and her ear twitched as Little Demon stirred in the carrier he'd been napping in.

'Hello, my most precious Little Demon,' Stars greeted; feeling her mind settle at the sight of her son's happy smile. He reached for her, so she picked him up and sat him in her lap; holding him upright and brushing back his short hair from his eyes. 'Have you had a mip day, my taa'han katka?'

Little Demon responded by blowing small bubbles with his spit, and then reached out; slamming his hand onto his mother's food with a joyful squeal as it splattered outwards onto the tablecloth.

Ketika gave a gasp that ended in a humoured laugh, as Stars pulled her son's hand back and quickly checked it over.

'Oh! Be careful, my kama berr!' she exclaimed, drawing a few concerned looks that quickly turned to chuckles. 'That's still hot, I don't want you to be miita.'

Little Demon just giggled, and licked at the sauce on his hands.

'Oh— Is that safe?' she asked, glancing to Ketika with worry. 'Is he allowed to eat this?'

'Yeah, should be fine,' Ketika answered. 'It's all the same stuff you'd find in baby food. Just in a pastry. And he's old enough to have solids.'

'But he's half dassen,' Stars commented. 'Dr Lakeki said they start eating solids later than nurlak....'

'True, but if he's trying it, maybe he's got the nurlak genes!' chuckled Ketika. 'I don't think there's any harm in letting him decide when he's ready for these things; it's better than him being fussy, after all.'

Stars smiled, at that, and flicked her ears in acknowledgement before scooping more of the splattered apple onto her fingers to offer to her son.

'Do you like it?' she asked as he grabbed her wrist and suckled on her fingers. 'My precious little berr, you can have as much as you want. I will always share with you.'

There was a pang in her heart as a memory from a long time ago, when she was

still very young, crept into her mind. The memory of being shoved, rather viciously, away from the food the rest of her family had hunted— And then her mother holding her close and saying something similar.

'Stars? Are you alright?' Ketika asked, his hand finding one of hers as it rested on the table. 'You look... worried.'

'Ketika, can I ask you a question?'

'Yes, of course.'

'Do you ever say something, and then remember a time it was said to you, first?' she asked. 'And even though the reason it was said to you is different, it makes you feel... strange? Like you can't believe you remember it so well, because it was so long ago and such a small thing?'

'A few times,' Ketika answered, poking at his own food with a thoughtful look. 'My father used to say that our past experiences shape who we are in the present, and that things that are said to us—even in passing— can change us. Become a part of who we are in our subconscious. And, in my *own* experiences, I've found it's the little things that tend to stick more.'

'Why do they "stick" more?'

Ketika just shrugged. 'I don't know.'

Stars sighed, at that answer, and went back to letting her son chew on her fingers.

He giggled, kicking out his legs, before releasing his mother's hand and grabbing at her chest with a squeal.

It was clear he wanted to nurse, so Stars pulled up her shirt and let him latch on.

He settled as he fed, and Stars pet his short hair affectionately, whispering affectionately to him.

'He's a charming little tyke,' Ketika chuckled, watching as Little Demon reached up to grab his mother's hair and pull on it. 'You're doing well by him.'

'Thank you,' said Stars, leaning her head down so her son could get a better grip on her as he nursed. 'That is a mip thing to hear. Sometimes I worry I don't know enough to look after him. But then everyone tells me I'm doing a good job, and it helps me feel less worried.'

'Hey, hon, you want me to replace that for you?' a humoured voice came from beside Stars, and she glanced over to see the server motioning at her food.

'Oh, no thank you,' Stars answered. 'I'm done eating. That's very nice of you to offer, though.'

'Ah, shall I take it, then?'

Stars gave a nod and a smile, and the server cleared her plate— And Ketika's, too, as he quickly picked it up and passed it to them.

'How are you feeling, Stars?' asked Ketika.

'Better,' was the honest answer.

The answer was followed by a happy giggle as Stars felt Little Demon let go of her breast, and she adjusted her son in her arms; resting him over a shoulder and gently petting his back. He burped, and then gripped her ear and pulled on it.

'Oof, doesn't that hurt?' Ketika asked with a wince. 'I've heard a baby's grip can be pretty powerful.'

'Na,' Stars replied. 'He's not very strong. Though, he *is* getting stronger. But it's

not miita— I mean, it doesn't hurt when he does this. Not really. And, even if it *did* hurt, I'm used to a lot worse.'

Ketika winced again, as Stars said it, and she realised it must not have been very a polite thing to say.

'Dr Kiti said I shouldn't be used to it,' she quickly added, hoping to show Ketika she realised she'd made him uncomfortable. 'And Kekik Distro says that nobody is allowed to hurt me, anymore. And she's right, and I'm not going to let them hurt me ever again.'

She wasn't sure he'd understood the intention, but he did smile, then, and gave her an approving nod.

'You ready to go?' he asked, picking up Little Demon's carrier. 'The rain's letting up— Might be best to get a move on before it starts again.'

'Yi, that's a very smart idea,' Stars agreed, rising to her feet and giving a polite wave to the server as they passed. 'Perhaps we could go to the library? Galdu has put aside a book for me. It's about the Aurn religion.'

'Ah, doing some reading up on me?' Ketika teased, playfully nudging Stars with the carrier before heading to the door.

'Of course!' Stars exclaimed, following Ketika from the eatery to the street. 'If it's what you believe in, it must be very important to you. And you're my friend, now; which means it's important to me, too, and I want to learn about it.'

'Aw, you're sweet,' Ketika chuckled. Then, he looked up and the sky and gave a cautious huff of air. 'Hm.... It might be best to go straight home. It looks like a storm might be brewing; don't want to get stranded out somewhere.'

'Oh, okay,' Stars was only a *little* bit disappointed, though she thought Ketika might be right.

The clouds above were thick and grey, and though there wasn't currently any rain spitting down at them, they only looked to get thicker and greyer... and in the distance there was a huge, deep, black cloud approaching.

Yes.

It was probably best to go home.

Chapter End.

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