

## Chapter 9: Yune 5th, Minda Year 10,053 AE (The Bedroom; the Nigelle-Beesa House)

The storm was raging deep into the night; the dim soulstone lamps that usually shone outside had been muted by the darkness of thick fog, and the clouds overhead hid the stars and moons and turned the sky into a dark black void of nothingness from which strikes of lightning bit down with bright and violent flashes.

The thunder outside boomed so loud that it was felt through the floor, and Little Demon responded with a terrified wail and clung tighter to his mother's hair as she paced the upstairs room and trembled.

Stars tried, rather desperately, to swallow down her own fears of the night so she could comfort her son. But she knew her attempts at gentle whispers were coming out broken and nervous as the wind outside howled like a thousand people crying out in agony.

Windows rattled with the force of the rain that slammed against their panes, which themselves seemed to lead into a world of empty darkness as they reflected the dim red light of Distro's candle.

Stars felt herself whimper as the woman put down another kitchen pot —the third, that night— and heaved a sigh of frustration.

'This storm better not do any more damage to this house, I swear!' Distro huffed, adjusting the pot so it caught the droplets of water that had begun to leak from the previously well-sealed roof. 'We've only *just* gotten ourselves comfortable! If we have to move *again* because of a flood, I'll flip my fucking lid!'

'At least it's still standing,' Dena pointed out; though she didn't sound anywhere even close to happy about the situation. 'If we were back in Heck'ne, those tisi'maar piles of sticks we lived in would have collapsed by now.'

'Eh!' Distro gave an annoyed grunt and waved a dismissive hand at the nurlak. 'It's *all* shit!'

Dena just rolled her eyes and shook her head, casting a glance to her daughter as Stars paced some more and buried her face into her son's.

'*Shh, shh, my katka,*' she whispered. '*You're safe. I promise, you are safe with me. I won't let anything hurt you. Na miita. Na miita.*'

Something lay on Stars' shoulder and she flinched, giving a squeak of fear as she turned to see what had touched her. She realised it was just Ka'harja, putting a hand on her shoulder to comfort her, and let out a long breath of relief.

'Hey,' Ka'harja said, softly. 'It's going to be alright. It'll be over by morning.'

Stars nodded her acknowledgement, swallowing her nerves down as her ears pressed back and her breath trembled. 'Can you— Can you tell me about your day, again?' she asked. 'I know I've already asked so many times, but I... I'm really scared, Ka'harja. And hearing about what you did today helps me feel better.'

'Of course,' Ka'harja put an arm around Stars and led her towards the stairs. 'I'll make you something to eat, too, yeah? Maybe some good food smells will help *everyone* feel a little better.'

Stars quietly agreed, as Distro gave another loud groan and flopped into the bed next to Dena; who shifted closer to lay over her and run a comforting hand through

her hair.

The last thing Stars saw of them, before they were obscured by the frame of the door, was her mother pressing a light kiss into Distro's cheek. Then she was suddenly in the kitchen, watching as Ka'harja lit the stove and began to prepare a meal of crickets, rice, and vegetables.

'Fetel is nice,' he told her for what must have been the sixth or seventh time that night. 'She lost her leg after a fire— Infection got into it, and it needed to be amputated. It uh. It was a hard thing to hear about, after what happened with Mum. But it's been something we can both relate with, so...' he gave a wide shrug, before pouring what was perhaps a little *too much* garlic oil into the wok; though Stars quickly realised it was so the smell of food would make it upstairs to their mothers. 'She's still getting used to her wheelchair, and needs her shop rearranged so she can move around properly. That's what I spent most of today doing: pulling things down off shelves for her, and moving furniture that was in her way so she'd have room to move her chair around.'

'Her *wheelchair*,' Stars said aloud, to make sure she understood exactly what kind of chair Ka'harja was talking about. She swallowed when he nodded, and held her son tighter against her chest. 'Kekik Distro said that Little Demon might need one of those. His legs don't work properly. They would have killed him for that, back in Heck'ne. But... *here*... he's allowed to be alive. And people want to help him. And they make sure he's *happy*, too. Not just *alive*, but *happy*...'

'Yeah, it was a hard thing for me to get used to, too,' Ka'harja chuckled, seeming to understand her tone as he tipped all of the prepared ingredients into the wok, one by one. 'When Mum first took me in, I was convinced everyone was just *waiting* for the right time to aim a blow at me! But you know what? There's been a lot more good people, than bad. The difference is kind of crazy, actually!'

Stars nodded in agreement at Ka'harja's words, pecking a kiss on Little Demon's head as his cries slowly began to fade into timid babbling.

The sizzling of the food was drowning out the wailing of the wind, and the smell of the garlic was familiar and comfortable. And it seemed like it wasn't just Stars who was feeling more relaxed as the aroma filled the house; Little Demon finally closed his eyes and gave an exhausted sigh and relaxed his grip on his mother.

Stars kissed him again, then looked back to Ka'harja to watch as he cooked. They spoke quietly, trying to keep away their anxiety of the storm outside; Stars asked many questions about Ka'harja's day at work, and he answered each one patiently. Even though he'd already answered all of them before.

Another crack of thunder sounded as Ka'harja turned off the stove, though Little Demon didn't wake as two bowls of rice were served and placed on the table.

'You want me to take him upstairs?' Ka'harja asked as Stars sat in her seat. 'I'm sure Mum and Dena won't mind watching him while you eat.'

Stars bit her lip, feeling hesitant... But she knew it would be easier to relax without her son in her arms, and so she relented; gently passing her son to Ka'harja. Little Demon roused as he was given to the man, though he didn't cry as Ka'harja gave him a friendly bounce and stuck out his tongue.

'Hey there, you little fuckhead,' Ka'harja chuckled. 'You want to go see your grandma?'

Little Demon gave a nervous babble; which Ka'harja returned in a more cheerful, slightly mocking tone, before taking the boy upstairs.

Stars fidgeted as her son left the room, feeling a bubble of anxiety rising in her chest.

*What if he was still scared, and needed her? She trusted her mother with him, but what if it wasn't enough, and he needed her? Was it selfish of her to put him down while she ate, when he had been so scared of the thunder?*

The thoughts pricked at her mind, as she stared at the empty doorway.

*He hadn't sounded happy as Ka'harja had taken him upstairs. Maybe she should go and get him—*

There was a firm and rhythmic knock at the front door; barely audible over the rain, but clearly not caused by the wind as it tapped out an almost musical beat.

Stars' ears twitched at the sound, and after a moment another knock sounded and she rose to her feet to hurry over to the door and let whoever was caught out in the weather inside.

She wasn't sure what exactly she was expecting to see; but what she was met with was still strange enough to surprise her.

Two women, both taller than herself, stood calmly and unbothered in the rain. They weren't foxen, or secas, or nurlak— No. Instead of fluffy tails or slimy skin or extra arms, they had short round ears and colourful feathered wings that were mismatched with their hair.

At a glance they looked to be one of the races from the Rendi —avio or alk, most likely— but as Stars looked them over she thought they didn't seem *quite* the same as the descriptions she'd read or the pictures she'd seen of the Rendi people in the books at the library. Were they perhaps mixed? They looked like they could have been mixed. Especially with the clothes they wore.

The shorter, darker-skinned woman was dressed in familiar-but-fancy clothes that were as blue as her wings; she looked like she belonged in one of the old, slightly-outdated wolveren fashion books Stars had flicked through at the library. Meanwhile the taller, more slender of the two was dressed in a stranger outfit that resembled the sort of clothes Sken might have worn.

*Human fashion*, Stars recalled what Sken had said. *From Sapious.... Were these two half human?*

The one in human clothes —with her pale skin and blonde hair and wings of grey-purple— gave a haughty sniff that made the ring in her nose shift. 'Abbttoh,' she said as a grin found its way to her lips.

Stars took pause at the familiar Heck'nerian greeting. It had been the *last* thing she had been expecting to hear from the women. 'A-Abbttoh,' she replied. Then, she stepped aside and opened the door further. 'You're very wet. Do you want to come in out of the rain? I don't think it's safe to be outside, when it's so dark and cold and windy.'

The heavy undersides of the pale woman's thick leather boots *thumped* against the floor as she wordlessly entered the house and glanced around.

The other woman, with the blue wings, followed her in with lighter steps; pausing to turn to Stars as the door was shut.

'Thank you,' she said, her voice rich with a strange accent that sounded like nothing Stars had ever heard before. She offered Stars her hand, then, and smiled. 'It's good to see you again, Stars.'

Stars cocked her head in confusion. 'Have we met? I don't remember you.'

The blue-winged woman opened her mouth, but was cut off by the taller

woman.

'We've met you a few times before,' she said as she examined the walls. 'But this is your first time meeting us.'

Stars' brow furrowed. 'A'la'ha?'

'Oh, that's *right*,' the blue-winged woman breathed. 'Well. In that case: I'm Janet.'

'Rachel,' said the other woman as she stepped up to the bathroom door; which she shut and began running her hand over in a strange motion. 'It's nice to see you again, Stars. And also to meet you for the first time.'

'So we *have* met?' Stars asked, her furrowed brow deepening as she repeated: 'I don't remember you.'

'We've met you,' Rachel said, firmly. 'You haven't met us.'

'That doesn't make sense,' Stars said, her voice growing just as firm as Rachel's had been. 'You're not making any sense. You're very confusing.'

'Thank you,' said Janet.

'I was not complimenting you,' Stars stated. 'You're confusing me. How is it possible to have met someone, without them having met you?'

'It's complicated,' Janet sighed. 'But, to put it simply.... We're from the future.'

'Well, actually, *technically* we're from the past,' Rachel corrected. 'Born in it. You know?'

'Everyone is born in the past,' Stars said.

'Except for people who aren't born yet,' said Rachel. 'They're not from the past.'

Stars could see her point. Though she still didn't understand most of the rest of what the girls were saying.

'I'll be blunt, Stars,' Rachel gave another sniff, still tracing invisible shapes into the door. 'We're here to pay back a favour that we owe you— Well, we don't owe it to you, yet. But we will, eventually.'

'Two years from now,' Janet offered. 'Give or take a few months.'

'Two years?' Stars twitched an ear in confusion. 'How do you know you're going to owe me a favour? Can you see the future? Ka'harja's boyfriend, Coff, *he* can see the future. He called himself a prophet— Though, he said that's different from the Heck'ne's mala'kala. Some people call the mala'kala the Prophet, in International. They call them that, because the first mala'kala could see the future. But the new mala'kalas haven't been able to do that for a long time.'

'Give it some time, the power comes back,' Rachel muttered, finishing her tracing. 'Ah, got it!'

'Got what?' Stars cocked her head as Rachel opened the bathroom door— And then, Stars gasped and stepped back in surprise when she saw the other side of it:

There was no bathroom inside anymore. Instead, there was a quiet, dark, hilly field; with a clear starry sky and long grass that swayed in the gentle wind.

'Gighi!' she exclaimed. 'What did you do?! Where has the bathroom gone?!'

'It's still there,' Janet told her. 'It's just. *Behind* the portal.'

'Portal?' Stars glanced to the blue-winged woman. 'That word is familiar. I think I read about portals, once. They're a type of magic, aren't they? And they... open like doors, between different places in the world!'

Janet gave an encouraging nod and a warm smile, seemingly genuinely pleased by Stars' bright memory; though Rachel gave a toothy hiss and motioned for them

both to step through the portal.

'Hurry up!' Rachel told them. 'We don't have all night!'

'Rachel, honey, we have all the time in the universe,' Janet scoffed a laugh and approached the other woman. She pecked a kiss on Rachel's cheek —rising on her toes to do so— and then shook her head. 'Be patient.'

'Hm,' Rachel hummed her acknowledgement, before looking back to Stars and beckoning her closer. 'You coming?'

'Where does it go?' Stars asked, planting her feet firmly to show she wouldn't be coerced through the portal without a *very* good reason. 'Why does it look... familiar?'

'You've been there before,' Rachel answered, vaguely.

'It's not too far away,' Janet promised. 'Only... four months?'

Stars' brow furrowed. 'What?'

'Oh, maybe it's closer to five months,' Janet corrected.

Stars planted her feet firmer into the floor. 'That makes no sense,' she said. 'That's not an answer.'

Janet made a face; looking like she thought it *was* an answer, and she didn't know how to explain it to Stars in any other way.

'Stars,' Rachel gave a sigh, sounding equal parts frustrated and sympathetic. 'I know that what we're saying is confusing, but we're trying to help you. There's something we need to pick up. And we need you to see how we get it, to believe in its power.'

'Its *power*?' Stars twitched an ear. 'What are you talking about?'

It was then that the sound of Ka'harja's footsteps began to thump down the stairs, and both of the strange women's wings fluffed up in urgency.

Janet rushed through the open door to the unusual outside, tripping a little on the uneven ground in her hurry. And Rachel stepped towards Stars, offering her hand for the nurlak to take.

'Come on,' Rachel urged, taking another step forward. Her gaze was one of concern as she met Stars' eye; genuine enough that it made Stars' own firm look falter. 'I know you have no reason to trust us. But please, come with us— We want to save your son's life.'

## **Chapter End.**

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