



Misfitted
(INCOMPLETE PREVIEW)
Don't Lose Hope #2
By C. Jade Wyton

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*To the person I could have become, had I not been
saved.*

I'm glad you never were.

Prologue:
Lorane 8th, Firthda
Year 10,044 AE
(The Family's Campsite; Heck'ne)

She'd done everything she wasn't supposed to.

The horrible brown clouds poured down their thick rain that turned the wasteland's surface into a layer of thick, sticky mud. Even the firmest parts of the ground would sink under too much weight, sending people falling to their deaths if they were unlucky enough to put their feet down on one of the many ga'oa pits hidden across the land.

Ga'oa pits were horrible things to a Har'py.

They were pits that led to caves deep in the planet.

Caves that inhabited demons, and goblins, and spirits of betrayers and traitors that had been thrown into the holes and left to their agonising deaths. Rumours said their ghosts would one day be eaten by evil creatures and trapped forever in magical glowing stones that spread across skin like rot and killed from the inside out.

Neg'an had never been allowed to watch the executions. But when the son of the troop's leader had been put to death she couldn't help being curious. She'd wandered out into the rain to listen as his parents dragged him away. He'd screamed so loud she'd felt her bones shudder.... He didn't deserve to die. He'd done nothing to deserve it. She wasn't sure why they felt he had to die, just because he had been there when his sister had fallen into a ga'oa.

Perhaps they blamed him for her death. He was supposed to be watching her, after all. But he was only nine. He couldn't stop the ground from opening beneath her. Not even Zen'efay herself could save her people from Scara's jaws. Not when the rain poured down the way it

did.

It made her scared. He'd always made her feel safe; she'd told herself if his lisp didn't cost him his life then her raspy, aching throat wouldn't cost her hers. If he was allowed to then live maybe, just maybe, she could live, too.

But he *hadn't* been allowed to live. He had been put to death. And if he hadn't killed his father he would never have gotten away.

That and... if Neg'an hadn't lied about the direction he'd run.

'WHAT DO YOU MEAN PERT'ANA IS DEAD?' the enraged shriek from Neg'an's father was barely audible over the rain, but Neg'an still flinched as he turned to their troop's leader.

'I mean Ka'harja killed him!' Kay'oten snapped back. 'That whelp of a boy sent him over the edge of the ga'oa! To his death, Lah'kort! He sent him to his death!'

'Are you *sure*?' asked Lah'kort, his breath short as the words sunk in. 'Are you *sure* he died?'

'It was a landslide,' Kay'oten put her hands over her head, her nails falling perfectly in place with the fresh wounds she'd gouged into herself in grief. 'I heard his screams choke out. He was buried. Buried in mud and filth in the worst of Underfor! He's lost. His body and soul. Forever....'

'*What do we do?*' Lah'kort's question was scarcely a whisper. He watched Kay'oten for a moment before losing his patience and shouting, 'KAY'OTEN! GIVE ME AN ORDER!'

At the shout, Kay'oten drew herself to her full height; though, that wasn't very high at all. Being foxen, she barely stood as tall as an eleven year old nurlak.... But Neg'an still flinched. Kay'oten was as strong as anyone who dared challenge her. No matter how much bigger than her they were. She'd taken on nurlak and harpies and even mouth-frothing sabre cats, and she'd *always* won....

‘Get me a hunting party!’ she spat. ‘I want him found! I want justice! I want him killed— Na! Na! I want him alive so I can kill him myself! I want him caught and brought to me so I can *strangle* the *last* little spark of *worthless* life out of his eyes! I want to see his *soul drain* from his pathetic carcass and I want to savour every moment of it for myself!’

Kay’oten’s anger only made Neg’an more glad she’d lied about Ka’harja’s escape, and she watched in silence as her father gathered a group of their best trackers and set out into the weather.

She knew it was pointless. She’d seen Ka’harja limp away, his blood diluted to nothing by the rain and his footprints swallowed up by the hungry and muddy ground.... He was Gone. Un-findable. Un-trackable. He had done all Neg’an had ever dreamt of doing and escaped Heck’ne.

For a moment she wondered why she hadn’t followed him. Why she hadn’t ignored her mother’s calls and limped with him to the ends of the horizon. The idea of escaping Heck’ne had sent a flutter through her chest that had made breathing harder than usual.

But the idea of freedom seemed so much less enticing without her family to join her.

Neg’an shook her head and sighed, her breath catching in her throat as a cough.

‘Neg’an! Deep breaths. Deep breaths, my beautiful carrot,’ her mother had been closer than she’d thought. In only a few moments she’d grabbed Neg’an and was rubbing her back desperately. ‘Breathe big in. And breathe big out.’

‘I’m mip, Kekik,’ Neg’an rasped, putting her arms around the back of her mother’s neck and clinging to her tightly. ‘It was just one cough.’

‘Are you sure?’ her mother asked, fear clinging to her voice. ‘You know how you are in the cold.’

Neg'an buried her face into her mother's shoulder and muttered. She wished her mother was able to pick her up like she used to. Hold her close and make everything seem better.... But her mother was as small as Kay'oten; her growth was stunted, she'd said. From a sickness. Though Neg'an didn't understand it.

'You would think *Lah'kort* had been Pert'ana's myit, the fuss he's making.... Whatever happened to him?'

'What do you mean "what happened to him," Kekik?' asked Neg'an. 'Hasn't Gorg always been like this?'

'Broja'kar mia! Don't let him hear you call him that,' Neg'an's mother gave her a tight squeeze and lowered her voice to a firm whisper. *'Call him by his name. Or call him Yalfit. Nothing else. Do you remember what he did last time you called him Gorg?'*

A horrible shiver coursed through Neg'an and she nuzzled tighter into her mother's arms. She remembered. She hadn't been able to turn her head properly for a week after the beating, she'd been so sore. 'I'm sorry, Kekik.'

'You never have to be sorry to me,' her mother whispered. *'My sweet little carrot. You never have to be sorry to me.'*

'DENA'COsa!' Kay'oten's voice screeched through the rain.

Neg'an's mother jumped at her name and quickly let go of her daughter. 'Yes, Kay'oten?'

'I don't want anyone else wandering off tonight,' voice low, Kay'oten stepped so close to Dena'cosa their noses touched. 'Keep those ababhi daughters of yours close. If either of them gets in our way I'll punish them as if they let Ka'harja go themselves!'

Neg'an felt a shiver run down her spine and she gripped her mother's hands tightly as Kay'oten stalked away. She wondered if she should tell her mother that she *had* let Ka'harja go herself— But what good would that do? He was gone now. She'd only get in trouble.

‘Come on, little carrot,’ Dena’cosa sighed and gently led her daughter toward their sleeping hovel. ‘You heard Kay’oten. Stay close to me tonight.’

‘I’m *kizza* ababhi...’ Neg’an rasped. ‘Am I?’

‘No, carrot,’ Dena’cosa comforted, sitting her daughter down in their bed. ‘You’re na ababhi.’

‘Definitely not,’ a voice muttered from the corner of the small shelter. There was a sniff, and Neg’an’s older sister sat up from under her tattered fur blanket. ‘You’re hakalika at *most*.’

‘Ta’lak, don’t...’ Dena’cosa sighed. ‘Don’t say that.’

‘Why? We’re *all* hakalika,’ Ta’lak replied. ‘If we weren’t we wouldn’t be here. And if our yalfit wasn’t completely ababhi in the most bwab ways, maybe I’d not have been born.’

‘Ta’lak—’

‘I know,’ Ta’lak sighed. ‘I’m sorry, Kekik. Maybe *I’m* ababhi.’

‘I don’t think you are,’ Neg’an said, her tone as honest as she could make it. ‘It’s everyone else who are ababhi. Being mean on purpose— *That’s* ababhi.’

‘See? You’re the smartest of us all! Hakalika at *most*,’ Ta’lak snorted a laugh. Then she groaned and put a hand on her bulging stomach. ‘Oh, I swear this berr has talons.’

Dena’cosa moved to her daughter’s side. ‘Pebble?’

‘I’m fine, Kekik,’ Ta’lak pushed her mother away. ‘Just pregnant. I’ll get over it in a month or two and it will be everyone else’s problem, instead.’

‘I worry about you,’ Dena’cosa mumbled. ‘You’ve always been a troubled one.’

‘More troubled than Lah’kort?’ Ta’lak challenged. When her mother sighed she shrugged and softened her tone. ‘You know, the harpies he leant me to treated me better than he did. I hope we run out of food again soon.’

‘Ta’lak!’

‘What? It’s a joke,’ Ta’lak rolled her eyes. ‘Mostly. They *did* treat me mip. Better than anyone here. If this berr is one of theirs I hope they want it —and me— back.’

‘Kay’oten doesn’t like tia’fio,’ Dena’cosa warned. ‘You know she kills any that are born.’

‘Yes, well, Pell’ti doesn’t give a dead spider’s shit about his berr being tia’fio,’ Ta’lak shrugged. ‘And I think even Kay’oten wouldn’t dare kill a half-harpy without checking with its yalfit first. And if she tries to hurt my berr, I’ll bash her head in with a rock or something. Oh, or I could always just stab Lah’kort!’

‘Ta’lak—’

‘Yes, Kekik, that’s my name. You don’t need to keep saying it,’ Ta’lak pushed herself to her feet and stretched. ‘Actually.... I’m going to go for a walk.’

‘Kay’oten said not to,’ Neg’an piped up. ‘She said anyone wandering around would be punished in the most mup way!’

‘Well, then, it’s a good thing I’m not going to *wander around*,’ Ta’lak snorted. ‘I know exactly where I’m heading— Don’t worry, Kekik. I’ll be safe. Keep Neg’an warm for me.’

Dena’cosa sighed as her daughter pushed out of the shelter into the rain.

‘Kekik?’ Neg’an asked. ‘Aren’t you going to stop her?’

‘You know her, carrot,’ Dena’cosa pulled her youngest close. ‘It wouldn’t make any difference if I tried. She makes me so lenta, sometimes.... Come. Broja’kar. Let’s get some sleep.’

‘Okay,’ Neg’an mumbled as she was led to bed. She curled into her mother under the scrap of fur they used as a blanket and tried to keep warm.

She knew she was supposed to close her eyes... but she just couldn’t. She wasn’t sure how long she spent trying to sleep. But the rain was loud, and she was cold, and she was scared for Ka’harja, with his broken leg and

bruised eye. It made it hard to sleep, even though her mother was snoring quietly beside her.

Maybe she could talk to Ta'lak about it when she came home. She might understand why Neg'an had let him go.

Yes. She *would* talk to Ta'lak, if Ta'lak came home before Lah'kort and Kay'oten.

But... she was taking a long time.

An awful long time. She'd never been out this long, before. She was usually back from her walks so quickly. It made Neg'an worry as the morning light crept into the hole-filled hovel and she heard Kay'oten and the other Har'pies coming home from their search for Ka'harja.

They sounded like they were angry, too, which only made Neg'an more worried.

Had they found him?

It didn't sound like it. They sounded too angry to have been successful—

'DENA'COZA!' Kay'oten screeched, bursting into the shelter and yanking Neg'an's mother to her feet before she even had time to fully open her eyes. She threw the nurlak against the wall and hissed angrily.

Neg'an let out a terrified scream as her mother was dragged outside and thrown to the ground.

'What— What's going on?' Dena'cosa cried. 'I haven't done anything—'

'What the hal'kata did you say to Ta'lak!' Kay'oten interrupted, advancing on the terrified woman.

'N-Nothing!' stammering, Dena'cosa tried to crawl away. 'I didn't say anything to her! Where— Where is she?'

'*GONE!*' Kay'oten screeched, kicking at the nurlak. 'That kata'li is *gone!* But not before she—' she didn't finish her sentence, instead motioning to her side.

Neg'an followed Kay'oten's finger and gasped when

she saw it.

Lah'kort was bleeding. His ear was torn and the side of his face was sliced open in a single, jagged line that looked painful and deep.

'Lah'kort!' Dena'cosa's cry was heartbroken as she struggled to her feet and attempted to comfort her son.

'Get off me, broja'kar!' Lah'kort hissed, pushing Dena'cosa to the ground. 'I don't need *your* help!'

'I told you!' Kay'oten grabbed Dena'cosa by the hair and yanked her into a kneel. 'I told you to keep your daughters under control!'

'I didn't— Know—' Dena'cosa gasped her lie. 'I didn't know she went out—'

Kay'oten let out a hiss and threw Dena'cosa down. 'Where's Neg'an?'

'I— I don't know—' she was cut off as Kay'oten hit her again.

'WHAT DO YOU MEAN YOU DON'T KNOW—'

'I'M HERE!' Neg'an cried, loud enough that her throat hurt. 'I stayed with her all night! I promise! She was watching me like she was meant to! Broja'nikar, na hurt her!'

Kay'oten growled as she turned and glared at Neg'an.

'Broja'nikar!' Neg'an dropped to her knees, bowing her head and holding up all four of her hands in a submissive gesture. 'Broja'nikar, na miita farfah kekik. I'm begging you! Broja'nikar. Do not hurt her!'

A hand closed around her wrist and she felt Kay'oten yank her viciously; though she didn't dare to disrespect her by standing.

'*What happened?*' the woman demanded, spitting in her anger. 'Did Ta'lak give you *any* indication she was going to do this?!'

'Na,' Neg'an lied, shaking her head. She knew that Ta'lak *had* made it clear she wanted to do something—

She'd said, just before she left, that she had wanted to stab Lah'kort. But Neg'an could never say that. It would make Kay'oten too angry, and she would blame Dena'cosa for it... 'Na, she didn't. She went to sleep at the same time my kekik and I did. I don't know when she left. Kekik fell asleep, then I fell asleep. And when I woke up she was gone.'

For a long moment, Kay'oten glared at the trembling young child who stared back at her; eyes wide and heart beating fast as she struggled her raspy breaths. Then Kay'oten snorted and turned away.

'Go back to bed, the both of you,' she ordered. 'Dena'cosa, you're lucky your zelkin is too ababhi to lie. Because I didn't believe you for a second!'

Chapter 1:
Morah 34th, Grada
Year 10,053 AE
(The Nigelle-Beesa House; Kokako Boaka)

Stars woke with a jolt; her eyes flying open as her breath caught in her throat and her entire body tensed so tight it ached.

She'd had another bad dream.

A terrible one.

One that made her feel cold.

Cold, cold, cold. So very cold. Cold right down to her bones.

Ka'harja gave a groan and sat up; the back of his shirt patched with dark and damp marks from Stars' sweat.

They'd been sharing a bed (or, more accurately, three small beds pushed together) since the beginning of Jasfe, when they'd first moved into their new home. Laying back-to-back in the cramped space while their mothers shared the other remaining bed on the opposite side of the room. And now it was well over a month later and nearing the end of Morah, and all that had changed was that Ka'harja and Stars had switched who slept next to the wall.

Ka'harja always took the wall side, now; Stars had originally preferred it, feeling safe and snug pressed between her friend and the cool plaster. But every night her Little Demon cried and she would have to get up to feed and change him. And she would have to crawl over poor Ka'harja, who would wake up to a hand or knee or elbow jabbing into some part of him or another as Stars lost her balance and landed on him.

He insisted he didn't mind, but it still made Stars feel guilty every time he stumbled out of bed and hit his head on the downstairs doorway while heading to the bathroom.

This time, though, Stars hadn't woken to her son's

crying; it had been a terrible dream that had pulled her from sleep.

A terrible, terrible dream.

She had been back in Heck'ne; cornered in her old sleeping hovel as Lah'kort's living corpse hissed and screeched and clawed at the baby in her arms like a ga'oa crawler come to steal her most precious treasure away. Blood oozed from his nose and eyes and throat, as it had during his death, and his body contorted in unnatural ways.

She'd cried for help; screaming until her throat was hoarse. But nobody had heard her as her child was ripped from her arms and consumed alive by the creature that resembled her father.

A gentle hand touched Stars' shoulder as she lay frozen on her side, her eyes locked on her baby's cot as her body trembled in the shock of what she'd seen in her dream, and she knew just from the way his finger's brushed against her that Ka'harja had seen it too.

He had been walking in all of her dreams, every night they lay together. Witnessing them as if they were his own.

It had been strange, at first, to hear him describe her own thoughts to her as if they had been his. She hadn't fully understood what was happening until she had discovered the town's library and out of curiosity (and perhaps some luck) decided to read about the Eight Star symbol that Distro had hung on the wall above her bed.

It made perfect sense after that; Ka'harja was clearly a dream master. Blessed by the deity Jornja to be able to reach into others' minds while they slept in order to witness their dreams and manipulate their thoughts.

He denied it, though. No matter how much proof Stars showed him or how many books she brought home to read to him; he refused to believe he was gifted with any kind of magical powers.

It was all very silly, Stars thought....

Then again, Ka'harja was a very silly person. At least

sometimes.

Not right now, though. Right now he wasn't being silly at all. He was being very, very kind to her.

A tear rolled down Stars' cheek, and she felt herself sniffle as Ka'harja wiped it away with the back of his thumb.

He said nothing. Though, somehow, his silent presence was enough to comfort her and she felt her breathing even and her body relax.

She finally broke her eyes away from her baby, glancing up at Ka'harja for a moment as he gazed down at her... and then she rolled out of bed; her feet hitting the floor with a quiet *thump* as she stumbled to the cot and checked on her son.

She resisted the urge to yank him from his bed and hold him close. She'd learnt that waking him when he slept was bad for him, and though she desperately wanted to hug him and feel his heartbeat and *know* that he was okay, she knew she couldn't.

So, instead, she simply stood over him and trembled; one of her four thin arms shakily finding its way under his nose to check his breathing.

It was even. And Stars felt her shoulders fall slack as he squeaked out a noise and twitched.

Was he dreaming, too? she wondered. *He looked like he was dreaming. But it was hard to tell.*

Finally, Stars managed to speak.

'Can berr dream?' she asked.

'I think so,' Ka'harja replied. 'They're people, right? And most people dream. I don't see why being a baby would mean they couldn't.'

Stars flicked an ear in acknowledgement, and softly stroked her hand over her Little Demon's cheek.

She hoped that he would have pleasant dreams. She'd tried to make his life too good for nightmares to find their way to him. But his first few days of life had been such

scary ones, she just couldn't be sure that he wouldn't remember all of the blood and death and violence and pain.

So she kissed him. Leaning in close and carefully pressing her lips to his forehead.

He stirred. A quiet, disturbed babble escaped him as he shifted but didn't wake and Stars quickly stepped back from his cot; her ears flicking up as she wrapped all of her arms around herself and waited for him to settle again.

'It's still so hard to believe he wasn't born dead,' she admitted, hearing the sorrow in her own voice. 'All my other babies were born dead.'

'I know,' Ka'harja comforted.

'I don't want to lose him,' Stars felt tears welling in her eye.

'I know.'

'I kosson him.'

'I know.'

'I kosson him more than I have ever loved anyone before in my entire life.'

'I know.'

'I'm scared, Ka'harja. Dr Lakeki said that he might not ever walk,' Stars shivered at the thought. 'His legs don't work properly. If we were still in Heck'ne, they would have killed him for that.'

'I know.'

'I don't want him to be killed.'

'He won't be,' Ka'harja's arm found its way around Stars, and an exhausted kiss pressed against her cheek. 'It's illegal to kill babies, here.'

'Good. It should be illegal everywhere!'

Ka'harja scoffed a laugh, and Stars stamped a foot.

'*It wasn't a joke!*' she muttered, frowning as deeply as she could so Ka'harja would know how serious she was being. '*Don't laugh at me!*'

'I'm sorry,' Ka'harja's hand slipped from around her,

and he made his way back to the bed to sit down. 'I agree though. Killing babies *should* be illegal everywhere.'

'Eewowm for saying you're sorry,' Stars mumbled her thanks. She still wasn't used to it; being apologised to. Back in Heck'ne, even when she was right, her mother had been the only person who would ever apologise to her. The others... she couldn't recall a single time that any of the warriors had ever said they were sorry to her. 'I'm sorry I got angry. I know you're not trying to be mean when you laugh at me. But it makes me feel bad when you do, because everyone always laughs at me.'

Ka'harja flicked his ear in acknowledgement, though he looked too tired to say anything as he rubbed his eyes and wiped his nose on the back of his hand.

'I wish Coff didn't have to leave,' the thought left her mouth as it came to her mind, and she felt her shoulders drop as she flopped onto the bed next to her friend. 'He was mip with my Little Demon.'

A sigh escaped Ka'harja and Stars knew he felt the same— Though she knew it was for a very different reason. He loved Coff. Loved him as more than a friend. Coff was his boyfriend; a person that he loved so much he had *chosen* to be his partner.

The idea of being able to choose a partner because of love was still so strange to Stars. And, before she could stop herself, her brain had made a connection that her mouth said aloud, 'I miss Fabecut.'

Ka'harja just shrugged.

'I thought things would get easier once we got to town,' Stars admitted. 'Everyone said that it would be more mip. But... it's harder. Much more mup.'

'I think we just need to make some friends,' said Ka'harja. 'It's been... almost two months, now. And we've spent most of it in the house—'

'You have,' Stars corrected. 'I go out every day!'

A chuckle escaped Ka'harja, though he smothered it

and side-eyed Stars. ‘Sorry.’

She decided not to get mad at him for laughing, this time, because he had tried not to. Instead, she kicked out her foot and examined her toes from a distance. ‘I liked living in the caravan. It felt like a big family. I could talk to any of them and know that they wouldn’t get mad at me.’

‘It was easier to know who to talk to, *that’s* for sure,’ Ka’harja agreed, looking like he was thinking *very* hard about how to say his thoughts out loud. ‘It’s.... Sometimes it’s harder to find someone to talk to when there’s more people. It’s weird to think of it that way, but.... When there’s more people you see everyone a little bit less. So when there’s too many people, they all seem like strangers.’

‘That makes sense,’ Stars felt the corners of her mouth turn in a smile. She was glad Ka’harja understood how she was feeling. It made her feel better.

A blubber from Little Demon sounded, then, and Stars’ ears twitched.

‘Sounds like he’s awake,’ Ka’harja gave a sniff and flopped onto his back. ‘Wish I wasn’t.’

‘You can go back to sleep,’ Stars told him as she rose to her feet and picked up her son. She held him in her lower arms, and let him grab at her hair as she pecked several kisses into his face.

‘You’ll be alright if I do?’

‘Yi.’

Ka’harja rolled over and, before Stars had even managed to pull up her shirt to feed Little Demon, began snoring.

Stars fed her son in the quiet dark; appreciating how the dim blue from the soulstone-lit streetlights illuminated the room through the open window. She brushed her fingers through his thin black hair and felt him grabbing at her own; his four tiny hands holding onto her weakly as she hugged him close.

He was getting stronger, but he still wasn’t strong

enough. The doctor Coff had found for him was proud of his progress, saying that he had improved a lot in such a short amount of time... but, still, when Dr Lakeki spoke of Little Demon's progress, Stars could still see the worry in her eyes. She could still see that there was more wrong with her baby. That there were things that they might never fix — Things that could hurt him.

It terrified her.

She wished, beyond all wishes, that she could do more for her son.

That was when Little Demon unlatched from her breast and gave a babble, and Stars pulled him away from her chest. She looked down at him for a moment, gazing into his pale green eyes as he flicked his ears back and forth as if only just realising he had them. Then, he smiled at her and lifted his arms, grabbing at her and squealing in joy, and she couldn't help but giggle as she pulled him up over his shoulder and pet his back.

He burped, though Stars didn't let him go. She held him close against her shoulder as he took a hold of her own ear and tugged on it. So she flicked it; feeling it pull out of his hand, before moving it back for him to grab again. He let out another happy squeal-like laugh so she did it again, and again, and again; unable to contain her own laughter as she did.

She tried not to laugh too loud; her family was sleeping, after all! But she couldn't help herself as she felt her son's lips close over the end of her ear and she quickly moved herself downstairs.

She lay on the floor, on the old rug Distro had brought home (she hadn't said where from, but Stars thought she could recall seeing it next to a dumpster while on one of her walks), and placed her Little Demon on her chest. She tried to sit him up — Dr Lakeki said that a baby his age *should* be able to balance enough to sit up! — but instead he flopped limply forward with a confused grunt and mumble, and

Stars had to peck a kiss on him and coo to stop him from becoming upset.

‘*I’m sorry,*’ Stars whispered into her son’s cheek. ‘*I’m sorry. You’re not hurt. Na miita. Na miita, my taa’han berr. I’m sorry.... Shh.... Shh.... Mia. Mia, my berr.*’

As if he understood the comforting words, Little Demon stopped his unhappy babbles and instead wrapped a hand around his mother’s ear again.

She smiled, a small giggle escaping her, and Little Demon gave a happy gurgle in response and grabbed her hair with all three of his free hands and tugged.

It didn’t hurt; his grip was far too weak for it to be painful and instead Stars’ hair simply slipped between his fingers as he blubbered and squealed.

‘Kosson, my kama berr,’ Stars told him, shifting him into a sitting position; though this time, she kept her lower hands holding him so he didn’t fall. ‘My beautiful Little Demon. I love you. I do! Yi! I love you more than anything else in the whole world! Yi, I do! More than anything! Even more than grass and flowers and sunlight!’

Little Demon gave a squeal as his mother poked his nose with a free hand, obviously overjoyed by the interaction.

Stars knew, reasonably, that he didn’t understand what she was saying. Her own mother had told her that babies couldn’t understand things like that until they were older... but still. Stars hoped he *understood* her. If not what her words meant, than what her words *meant*.

She thought that he might have, from the way he grabbed at her hand and nuzzled it; her fingers making their way inside his mouth as he giggled and grabbed at her with all of his arms.

He lifted his wings (something that made Stars’ heart skip a beat, as just a month ago he hadn’t been able to do so) and gave a loud squeal of joy as he bounced and tried to stuff his mother’s entire hand down his throat.

Stars pulled her fingers back, matching her child's laughter as she lowered him down to peck a kiss on his cheek.

'You are so important,' Stars whispered in his ear, eliciting a happy gurgle. 'You are the most important thing I have ever known. You changed everything. I don't know what I'd do without you; so you have to get stronger, yi? You have to be the strongest you can be. You have to live.... Yi tai, na zi'kaf. You must kami küta, so I can be taa'han.'

'Stars, honey? You doing alright?'

The familiar voice spoke from the foot of the stairs, and Stars twitched her ears and peered over her son's head as Ka'harja's mother, Distro, stepped to her side and poked her with a foot.

'Yi yi, Kekik Distro,' Stars replied as the woman grinned down at her. 'I'm enjoying some time with my Little Demon. I didn't want to wake you or Kekik, so I came downstairs with him. Because he can be loud, and I know my kekik is a light sleeper. Not like you, Kekik Distro. You're a very heavy sleeper.'

'Heh, always have been. You should have seen my poor father trying to wake me for my tutors,' Distro said with a humoured snort. Then she twitched an ear towards the door. 'I'm heading out to beat the morning rush to the market. You want to come? We can swing by Lakeki's clinic after for Demon's appointment, if you'd like?'

Stars considered it seriously for a long, long moment, then she flicked an ear in an unsure gesture. 'Ka'harja was going to take me. Would it be rude to go out without telling him?'

'I'll leave him a note,' Distro suggested. 'He'll see it when he wakes up, then.'

'Oh! That is a good idea, Kekik Distro!' Stars exclaimed, taking her baby in her lower arms so she could push herself upright with her upper ones. 'Then he will

know where I went, and he won't be looking for me or worried about being late! Mip mip, Kekik Distro! You're very smart!

Distro gave a deep, chesty laugh as she took a pen and paper from the worn-down shelf she'd gotten from a neighbour (in trade for a potion to help the oak sapling in their front yard stop wilting, Stars had been told). She scribbled something down onto the paper before disappearing up the stairs.

She reappeared only a few moments later; carrying Stars' daytime clothes in her arms as she did.

Stars took her clothes, passing her son to Distro so she could get changed.

'He's getting heavy,' Distro commented, resting the child on her hip. Despite the child's size when compared to the small foxen woman, Distro had no trouble holding him. She had a magical kind of strength to her, since she'd called Klict.

'Yi!' Stars beamed as she tucked her singlet into her skirt and *clicked* the buckle on her belt shut. 'Dr Lakeki said that he's almost a healthy weight!'

'Good! You're fattening him up, just as you should be!' Distro joked as she nuzzled into the child's face and blew a raspberry into him. 'It took me *much* longer than it should have to put some meat on Ka'harja, you know! I tried so hard to get him to eat—you think he would have been a good eater, considering where he came from— but he was so hesitant to take anything from me, at first! I swear he thought I was trying to poison him!'

'Well... Kay'oten always made him wait until last to eat,' Stars said as she took her son back. 'If he ate without permission she would beat him up.'

A disgusted look passed over Distro, then, and Stars folded down her ears and looked away; scared she'd made the woman upset at her.

But, she realised quickly that it wasn't *her* that Distro

was angry at as the foxen gave a low growl-like grunt and clicked her teeth together. ‘*Kay’oten*.... I wish I could kill her all over again, just to experience the feeling of her bones breaking between my teeth twice!’

Stars let her ears twitch back up as Distro gave a snort and shook her head.

Then the woman pulled down her hood over her head and her scarf up over her snout; taking a moment to adjust them before making for the door and beckoning Stars to follow.

‘I wish you didn’t hide your face all the time,’ Stars said as she hurried after the woman. She ducked under the low doorway and stumbled out into the street as Distro closed the door behind them, and she realised that the air outside was warm and comfortable and the night was beautiful. Then she wrung her hands as she realised *just* how cold she’d felt when she’d woken up. She wondered for a moment if Distro got the same sick feeling in her stomach when she thought of what *Kay’oten* did to *Ka’harja*, as *she* got when she thought of what *Lah’kort* might have done to her Little Demon if they’d stayed.... Though she pushed the thought to the back of her mind as she looked down to Distro and brushed a finger over the top of the woman’s nub-like horns that poked out from her hood. ‘I can’t see you smile when you wear your scarf, and you have a very nice smile.’

‘I’m more comfortable this way,’ Distro replied, her tone much the same as Stars’ as she pulled her hood firmer over her face. ‘People stare less.’

Stars didn’t think that was quite true— People seemed to stare at Distro just the same amount when she covered her face as they did when she didn’t. They knew who she was, now, and even when she hid her draconic features with layers of cloth the people in the city still recognised her.

It was a curious kind of staring, Stars thought. An

interest edged with the same sort of awe and amazement that the foxens in the caravan had had when Distro first transformed and called forth the spirit of the maiden.

But Stars didn't argue her point. She knew it was pointless. Distro was stubborn, and it would be just the same as trying to argue with Ka'harja about being a dream master— They'd talk her in circles and then change the topic on her, and she'd be too stunned and frustrated to realise it had even happened until a few hours later.

So instead of trying to convince Distro that nobody was judging her, she let herself become distracted by her son as they started down the street; focusing her energy on him as he grabbed at her hair and clothes and babbled happily at her as if trying to hold conversation.

The market was on the other side of town and by the time they arrived the sun was starting to peek out over the horizon and several of the stalls were pulling down their waterproof tarps.

Stars greeted each shopkeeper pleasantly as she passed; though their responses felt so impersonal that by the time Distro paused to examine their wares, she was beginning to wonder if it was worth the effort...

She shook her head and pushed the thought away.

Of course it was worth the effort— Kindness was *always* worth the effort! If it wasn't, then she wouldn't even be here. If kindness wasn't worth it, Ka'harja and Distro and Sken and Annanyn and Koko and— And *everyone* who had helped her wouldn't have helped her. They would have left her behind.

They would have left her behind like Fabecut did.

The new and sudden thought smacked into her heart her like her father's palm against her cheek, and she took a laboured breath as she held her baby close and tried to keep her composure.

Where in Underfor had that thought come from?

Why had it been such a horrible one?

Why would she think something like that?

Distro's ear turned as Stars swallowed, and she knew the woman was watching her closely. Even if she wasn't looking directly at her.

So Stars took a deep breath, trying to even her breathing as she took the two steps to Distro's side and looked down at the meats she was examining.

'Are these farmed or hunted?' Distro asked the shopkeep.

'Farmed, hunted,' the shopkeep told her, motioning to each side of their stall in turn.

'Hm...,' Distro rubbed her chin before selecting a cut of venison from the "hunted" side. 'Just this.'

Stars stopped paying attention, then, as her Little Demon gave a small cry and she realised that it was time to feed him again. She tugged out her shirt from her skirt and awkwardly lifted it; holding her son against her chest so he could latch on and eat.

She felt Distro tap her on the leg as she passed and, after her son was settled into feeding, she followed the foxen to the next market stall and quietly watched her buy a bag of uncooked rice. And then the next stall, where Distro bought a single lemon.

And then Little Demon unlatched from Stars' breast and she lifted him over her shoulder, petting him on the back until he burped and mumbled and closed his eyes to nap. She pecked a kiss onto him as he nuzzled into the curve of her neck, then looked back down to Distro and let out a long breath.

'Being a mother is a very scary thing,' Stars said, softly. 'You never feel like you can do enough to keep your berr safe, even when you're doing everything you can. You try and try and try, but there's so much you just can't fix....'

'Mm,' Distro gave a low hum of agreement as she became a little too focused on a cart of vegetables. 'I know

what you mean.... It's okay, though, Stars. He'll be fine.'

'Dr Lakeki said he might never walk,' Stars pushed. 'His legs don't work properly. If we were still in Heck'ne, they would have killed him for that.'

'Well, then, it's a good thing you brought him here, isn't it?' Distro said as she examined a potato. 'You did good, listening to your gut and getting him out. You're a good mother.'

'I don't *feel* like a good kekik,' Stars admitted. Then, after a long, long moment of silence as Distro squeezed a tomato, Stars flicked her ears down and sighed, 'What's going to happen to him if he never walks?'

'I'll buy him a wheelchair,' Distro answered, simply.

'A... wheel... chair?' Stars repeated, slowly. 'What's a wheelchair?'

'A chair with wheels,' said Distro.

Stars didn't quite get it, and as Distro glanced over her shoulder and grinned she realised her confusion must have been written all over her face.

'Lakeki might have one in her office she can show you,' Distro said with a chuckle. 'It's something that helps people who can't walk to move around.'

'Oh...' Stars' ears flicked back and forth for a moment as she thought very, *very* hard about what a chair with wheels might look like and how it might work. She settled on an image she wasn't sure was quite so accurate; a kitchen chair with four large caravan wheels instead of legs and a horse at the front to pull it. She knew it didn't seem quite right. But it was all she could imagine as Distro purchased a bag's worth of vegetables and turned on her heels.

'Well, I'm done!' Distro blurted. 'We should head to Lakeki's for Demon's appointment. Ka'harja told me it was first thing?'

'Oh, yes, we don't want to be late!' Stars agreed, hurrying after Distro. 'Dr Lakeki said that Little Demon

needs to get his “vaccinations.” Though, I’m not entirely sure what those are.’

‘Well...’ Distro gave a loud sniff. ‘I won’t spoil the surprise.’

Chapter 2:

Morah 34th, Grada

Year 10,053 AE

(The Consult Room; Dr Lakeki's Clinic)

The consult room was cool and comfortable, despite the smell of alcoholic antiseptic that clung to every surface. It had been decorated in a very thoughtful way to try and bring comfort to the children who came in for treatment. The walls were painted with a colourful scene; an unnaturally bright blue sky filled with fluffy white clouds sat flat behind grassy green hills, which were broken only by stylised trees and cutely-drawn dogs. The chairs were carved with snake-shaped legs and painted with an overwhelming array of colours, and the lamps that held the soulstone lights that brightened the room were shaped like little fruits and vegetables. Even the jar of chocolate drops (which were all very bitter dark chocolate, as most foxen children preferred) was in the shape of a snake curled up protectively around its eggs.

The window on the far wall had been opened to try and air the room out of a very pungent vomit smell that hadn't quite faded since the previous patient had somehow managed to shoot a spray across a section of the roof.

The open window carried the screeching sound of Little Demon's wails into the street, causing passersby to give quick glances into the room before realising it was a clinic and hurrying past.

Stars tried desperately to comfort her baby, but he had just been given *eleven* different injections and a significant amount of her energy was currently going into not bursting into tears, herself, as the crippling feeling that she had broken his trust ripped at her heart.

'His lungs are getting stronger, at least,' Dr Lakeki said with a sheepish look as she thumbed at the latch on the

box of used needles. 'That had me *very* concerned. Even for a dassen he wasn't making enough noise.'

Stars held Little Demon closer, pressing another kiss into his cheek as she didn't acknowledge the doctor. *She could barely take it, anymore! She hated seeing her son cry like this!*

Distro clicked her teeth together and nodded as Stars gave a whimper and a sniff, and she addressed the doctor instead, 'He's been making a lot of noise, lately. Mostly babbling and laughing.'

'Not so much crying?'

'Honestly? No,' Distro answered. 'He does do it, but not often. He usually gives these quiet, upset exclamations instead. I suppose they're *technically* crying, but not like *this*,' she motioned to Little Demon. 'It's more like he's saying "hey!" and then waiting for a response. And, well. Stars almost always responds before it comes to actual crying.... *Because she's a good mother.*'

The last sentence was aimed in Stars' direction; Distro's voice rising to try and get the woman's attention.

Stars heard her, though her only response was to curl tighter into her child and comfort him with even more kisses.

She was supposed to *protect* him from pain! To make him feel like nothing was ever going to hurt him!

But instead she'd held him in place while he'd wailed and cried and wiggled and looked at her with those sad, pleading eyes that screamed; *I don't know what's happening! Help me!*

And even though she trusted Dr Lakeki and knew that the injections were to keep him healthy and safe, she couldn't help but feel like she'd betrayed him.

'Mhm,' Dr Lakeki hummed, making a note in Little Demon's file. 'I feel confident putting that down to his dassen lineage.... I'm not *too* familiar with dassen-specific biology, but I *have* been doing some reading on them since

our initial appointment and that sounds fairly normal.’

‘Babies not crying is so strange,’ Distro continued. ‘I remember my younger brothers used to cry over every little thing. Though, they were wolverines. And in my experience wolverine *adults* have a tantrum over every little thing, too!’

Lakeki muffled her chuckle. And then she took a deep breath before her smile fell and she rapped her fingers over the top of her used-needle-box and flicked back one of her braids. She had that look in her eyes, similar to how Ka’harja would look when he was thinking hard about how to say something.

‘There is... *one* more thing that’s concerning me,’ she finally decided on.

Stars’ ears twitched, and she finally looked up at the woman; worry all over her face as she met Dr Lakeki’s gentle-but-serious gaze.

‘You’ve not been vaccinated, have you, Stars?’ she asked.

Stars shook her head.

‘I didn’t think so,’ a short breath, not *quite* a sigh but also not quite *not* a sigh, escaped the doctor as her fingers closed into a fist and she gave her needle box a quiet knock with her knuckles. ‘You know I’m very concerned about Little Demon’s health. In his current condition he really can’t risk getting sick. And, while you’re breastfeeding, anything you catch will be passed down to him.... And because you’ve been travelling the likelihood of you having caught something is significantly raised...’ she rubbed at her chin before pressing back her ears. ‘I think you should be vaccinated, yourself, as well as taking some preemptive treatments for things you might have picked up. I don’t usually treat adults, but I think that the time it would take you to find a doctor for yourself would be too much of a risk, so I’m willing to make an exception today.’

Stars’ ears flicked down and she felt her eyes go wide

as she glanced to Distro. ‘Wh... What do you mean? Things I might have picked up?’

‘Well, when I spoke with Dr Missesa—’

‘*Coff*,’ Distro clarified to Stars.

‘He said that he didn’t have the stocks for treating nurlak illnesses,’ Dr Lakeki continued. ‘He didn’t need to, with the caravan he worked for having no nurlak with them. Until they took you in, of course,’ she took a deep breath, looking sheepish. ‘I didn’t have much stock, either, as there aren’t many nurlak in town. But I contacted some of my colleagues in other clinics and they told me what I needed.’

Stars swallowed as Dr Lakeki opened a draw in her desk and took out a small, lidless box of syringes, salves, and bottles.

‘There are twenty-seven different treatments in this box,’ she said, bluntly. ‘And with your consent, I would like to administer all of them.’

Stars had to fight the urge to climb out the open window and run home to hide under her bed. She remembered how uncomfortable some of the treatments that *Coff* had given her had been, and looking at her poor Little Demon, now....

She swallowed, pushing down her fears and giving a small nod. ‘Yi,’ she said. ‘That’s okay. You can do that.’

‘Thank you,’ Dr Lakeki gave her own nod and immediately began going through the box. She took out several of the pre-filled syringes and laid them out in order. ‘I think we should start with the vaccinations. They protect against some of the more severe illnesses....’

Stars nodded again, and felt Distro’s hand brush gently against her arm. She glanced to the woman with a nervous look and was met with a warm-but-sympathetic smile.

Then, she took in a deep breath. ‘Kekik Distro?’

‘Yes, hon?’

‘Will you hold my Little Demon?’

‘Of course.’

Gently, not actually wanting to give up her still-wailing son, Stars laid her baby into Distro’s arms and pulled back; all four of her hands wringing with anxiety.

‘Now, now,’ Distro comforted, holding Little Demon against her shoulder and petting his back as she stood and paced the room. ‘You’re alright. You’re alright. I know it hurts, but you’re going to be okay...’

‘Stars?’ Dr Lakeki gently got Stars’ attention, and the nurlak turned to her just in time to watch as she removed the protective metal cap from the needle in her hand. ‘This might sting a little bit, but it won’t be too painful, I promise.’

‘Okay,’ Stars managed. She took a deep breath as Dr Lakeki stepped around the desk and took up at her side.

The woman had to climb onto Distro’s abandoned chair to stand even close to eye-height with Stars, and after a moment to get her balance she took a deep, calming breath and spoke softly. ‘Try to relax,’ she said, cleaning Stars’ arm with a small wet swab. ‘It will hurt less if you do.’

Stars didn’t like that combination of words; she thought that she might have heard that advice before, somewhere a long time ago, though she couldn’t place it as a sharp sting pierced the shoulder of her upper left arm and she squeezed her eyes shut tight. ‘*It hurts!*’ she squeaked. ‘*It hurts like a bite!*’

‘Almost through it,’ Dr Lakeki comforted. Then she removed the needle and taped down a piece of cotton onto Stars’ arm where she’d been injected. ‘There we go. First one done. Was that as bad as you thought?’

‘Na,’ Stars admitted, feeling herself relax. ‘*It did* hurt though.... It must have hurt even more for my poor Little Demon....’

‘Yes, things like this do tend to hurt more when we’re

young,' Dr Lakeki agreed, retrieving and preparing the next injection. 'But it's necessary. You understand?'

'I understand,' Stars confirmed, looking away as Dr Lakeki cleaned another spot on her arm. 'I know sometimes things are miita and hurt, even when they're good for you. I wish that wasn't how it was, though. I think it's strange that's how the world works. It would be much more mip if the things that were good for you felt good, too.'

'Perhaps we could talk as a distraction,' Dr Lakeki suggested. 'I still have some more questions about your family history.'

'Yi, I can talk,' Stars replied. 'I'm very good at talking.'

'Aren't you ever?' Distro chuckled, a hand gently petting Stars' side.

Stars tried to focus on Distro's touch, instead of the second needle that poked her arm. 'What questions do you want to ask? I might not be able to answer them all. I've never been very good at answering questions. I don't know very much at all, so I'm usually better at asking them.'

The second needle was removed from her arm, and another swab was stuck down to stop the bleeding.

'I've got in my notes that your mother has dwarfism,' Dr Lakeki said, softly, and began to clean another spot on Stars' arm. 'Are there any other medical conditions that might run in your family?'

'Hm...' Stars had to think hard about that one. 'You mean sicknesses?'

'Yes,' Dr Lakeki answered, pushing the third needle through Stars' skin. 'Any deformities or sicknesses. Or anything you know that has killed family members before.'

'Oh, sabre cats and spiders, mostly,' Stars said, flicking her ears as Lakeki gave a nod that told her that wasn't *quite* what she'd meant but she wasn't going to say so out loud. 'Um.... I had other babies, too. But they were all born dead.'

‘I’m sorry to hear that,’ Dr Lakeki’s tone was soft and genuine, as she sighed and taped another swab to Stars’ arm. ‘Miscarriages are hard to process. Especially for wanted children.’

‘They *were* wanted,’ Stars returned the sigh. ‘I wanted each and every one of them, but none of them ever breathed. Not one breath.... I don’t know what I was doing wrong.’

‘I’m sure it wasn’t your fault,’ Dr Lakeki reassured. ‘A lot of pregnancies in Heck’ne fail.’

‘Really?’ Stars asked, trying to ignore how tender her arm was becoming as Dr Lakeki cleaned another spot.

‘Yes. I remember my mentor telling me once that around fifteen percent of Heck’nerian pregnancies fail,’ she said, though Stars didn’t understand what the word *percent* meant. ‘Here in the Empire we have less than three percent fail. Life in the Heck’ne is hard, and it puts a strain on expecting mothers. It’s not anyone’s fault; it’s just a sad fact of life. I remember my mentor telling me a miscarriage was why she left Heck’ne to become a healer.’

Stars cocked her head as Dr Lakeki mentioned her mentor. ‘Your mentor was from Heck’ne?’ she asked. ‘Was she a runaway?’

‘No, no,’ Dr Lakeki shook her head, injecting Stars again. ‘She wasn’t. She didn’t have anything to run away from— She was proud to be Heck’nerian.’

Stars’ knew she was making a rude face, but she wasn’t able to stop herself. *Proud to be Heck’nerian....* The only people she’d ever known who were proud to be Heck’nerian were people like Lah’kort and Kay’oten; terrifying warriors who hurt anyone they could just to prove their strength.

‘Hm...’ Dr Lakeki paused, her hand hovering over her next needle for a long moment.... She didn’t pick it up as she turned back to Stars and gave her a sympathetic ear-flick. ‘Dr Missesa told me about your troop.’

‘He did?’ Stars’ rude face turned into a sad one, then, and her gaze fell to the floor.

‘Yes. And I understand why you’re hesitant to trust people from your old culture, but...’ she paused again, looking unsure. ‘Well. I’m not sure if it’s my place to say. I don’t want to upset you or be rude.’

Stars’ ears perked up, at that, and she couldn’t help giving a weak smile. ‘Thank you. Not many people think about not wanting to offend me. It’s okay if you say what you want to say, even if it’s rude. I say rude things all the time. Never on purpose, though. Always on accident.’

Dr Lakeki gave a polite half-nod, half-bow to the nurlak, before speaking softly, ‘I don’t believe you were raised in the real Har’py religion.’

Stars felt herself making another rude face; this one just as confused as the last.

‘My mentor told me about her time in Heck’ne,’ Dr Lakeki clarified. ‘She said there were a lot of cults using the Har’py name to teach sacrilegious beliefs.’

‘Sacrilegious?’ Stars echoed.

‘Lies,’ Dr Lakeki said, simply. ‘They taught lies.’

Stars shifted anxiously, not liking what she was hearing but not completely sure why it bothered her so much. She cast a glance to Distro and was glad to see that her discomfort was matched; she told herself if Distro was uncomfortable, too, then it meant she wasn’t being *completely* unreasonable....

‘I’ve upset you, Dr Lakeki observed with a wince. ‘I’m sorry. It’s just.... Heck’ne equality is something I feel rather strongly about. Um. Dr Missesa said that chose me specifically because my mentor was outspoken on discrimination against Heck’nerian immigrants. He knew I wouldn’t judge you for anything that might have happened to you, or that you... might have done.’

Stars felt her shoulders go slack, at that. ‘I...’ she paused, her ears folding down and her nose scrunching up

in an upset expression. ‘I don’t really want to talk about what happened to me,’ she admitted. ‘I’m not mad at you; I know you’re just trying to be nice to me. But it really hurts to talk about, right now. I’m not sure why.’

‘I understand,’ Dr Lakeki said, softly. ‘We can drop the subject— I’ll only bring it up when I have to for Little Demon’s health.... We’ve gotten off-topic, anyway.’

‘Have we?’ Stars asked, her ears twitching as Dr Lakeki nodded. ‘What were we meant to be talking about?’

‘Sicknesses that run in the family,’ Dr Lakeki reminded her. Then, she turned and retrieved the next needle and sterile swab. ‘Physical or mental.’

‘Mental sicknesses?’ Stars cocked her head— Then took in a hiss of air as the needle stung her arm. ‘You mean being ababhi?’

Dr Lakeki pulled the needle from Stars’ skin and then paused; a sad and sympathetic look on her face. ‘I wouldn’t use a slur for it, but... yes.’

Stars wasn’t sure, exactly, what a “slur” was, but the way that Dr Lakeki looked at her made her chest tight in a way she could barely understand. Like the woman could see into her past, and hear all the times she had been called that word— And it was clear she thought that it had never been deserved.

‘They used to call me hakalika, too,’ Stars said. ‘Hakalika in the head.’

‘*Mm*,’ Dr Lakeki gave a hum and a nod, as she picked up the needles she’d used so far and placed them in her needle-box. ‘Was anyone else in your family hakalika?’ she asked.

Stars shrugged, letting out a long, sad breath as she did. ‘I think that answer might change, if you asked different people. My rek —um, that means sister— she used to say that my yalfit, who was both our gorg but not *her* yalfit... uh.... that means she was—’

‘I know Har’py words,’ Dr Lakeki reassured, sitting

down in the chair she'd been standing on and pulling her notebook into her lap so she could write. 'He was your father but not hers, and you all shared a mother. Correct?'

Stars nodded, and felt Distro's hand pet her leg as she passed— And as she did, she realised Little Demon had finally stopped crying.

'Her name was Ta'lak,' she said. 'Ta'lak used to always say that Lah'kort was hakalika, because he would get so angry even when nothing had happened. So angry that he would walk around and talk to himself and growl and get into fights. Ta'lak would tell him he was hakalika for it, and then he would yell that *she* was the hakalika one, because she would hear people talking when they weren't there.'

'Ah,' Dr Lakeki underlined that note. 'Hearing voices is concerning. Do *you* ever hear voices in your head?'

'Just my own, and that's mostly when I talk,' Stars answered. 'I never heard voices like her. She had entire friends that nobody else could see. Kekik used to say she'd grow out of them, but I don't think she really believed it.... Kekik *never* seemed to believe the things she said. Not really.'

'I see,' pen tapping against her notebook, Dr Lakeki chewed her lip. 'I *see*.... Lah'kort's aggression —and I'm sorry to ask you this— but was it... directional?'

'A'la'ha?' Stars questioned. 'What do you mean by "directional"?''

'Was it outwards anger, at everyone else? Or inwards at himself?'

'Oh, outwards,' Stars confirmed. 'Always outwards. Usually at me or Kekik.'

'Mhm,' Dr Lakeki crossed out a note— And then, after a moment of hesitation, rewrote it. 'Hm.... He never hurt himself?'

'No,' Stars shook her head. 'Why?'

'I'm just wondering if it was caused by the culture he

was raised in, or if it is a symptom of something... *else*,' she replied, a careful and deliberate note to her tone that Stars didn't understand.

However, Distro seemed to know exactly what was being implied, and shook her head at the doctor. 'It wasn't the self-feeding sickness,' she told her. 'I met the man, and I've discussed how he was with his mother. The behaviour didn't match. He was just an asshole.'

Dr Lakeki nodded and crossed out the rewritten note, a sigh of relief escaping her. 'Thank the gods... I would have hated to report a potential outbreak.'

'An outbreak?' Stars twitched her ears. 'What that's mean? What's the self-feeding sickness?'

'Horrible disease,' Dr Lakeki said, shortly. 'It's only carried by nurlak, and symptoms only show in the males. It affects their brain and makes them paranoid and aggressive. Eventually they...' she hesitated, her eyes flicking from Stars to Little Demon and back. 'It kills them, if left untreated. Actually, I'd like to make sure you and Little Demon both take preventative medication as you've been travelling and there's a chance you may have been exposed.'

A pang of fear squeezed at Stars' heart. 'Please. I don't want him to die!'

'He won't,' Distro promised, answering before Dr Lakeki could. 'I can make the treatment at home. Ka'harja can, too. He's very good at it— It's the first thing I ever taught him!' there was a burst of pride in Distro's voice as she mentioned her son, and her confidence helped Stars to relax. 'We can head back to the markets and get the ingredients we need for it before we go home. How does that sound?'

Stars nodded, a weak smile finding her lips. 'I would like that very much, Kekik Distro.'

'Right,' Distro gave Stars a confident nod and pat on the side. 'You're living with alchemists, now, so you don't

ever have to worry about being sick ever again!’

Chapter 3:
Morah 35th, Yieda
Year 10,053 AE
(The Bathroom Floor; the Nigelle-Beesa House)

Stars was feeling very, very sick.

After leaving Dr Lakeki's office and making their way back to the markets, Stars had thought she'd felt a little bit queasy.... And then, when they'd gotten home, she was sure she was feeling dizzy. So she'd spent the day in bed; needing assistance to sit up to feed her Little Demon when he had cried. Each time Ka'harja helped keep her upright her head would spin and she'd have to close her eyes as her mother held her son in place to feed.

She knew that Dr Lakeki had said she might not feel well as her body processed all of the medications.... But the nature of the nausea she was feeling from the vaccines hadn't *truly* settled in until the next morning, when she'd woken up poor Ka'harja by throwing up all over the bed and, subsequently, him.

She hadn't felt much like being around her family, after that. And they'd respected her wishes. So now she sat on the floor and clung sideways to the toilet, her next few bouts of vomiting having been too projectile to actually make it into the bowl (instead it trailed across the room to the opposite wall), all alone and disgusted by the taste of her own mouth.

She could confidently say that she was having a very bad day.

She felt like she'd been punched in the head. And then the stomach. And then stabbed in the arm. And then punched in the head again.

And by the sounds of her son's wailing, he was feeling very much the same as her.

Slowly, Stars tried to push herself to her feet; but she was so unsteady and weak she barely made it to her knees.

Still, though, she gripped the toilet seat with all four of her arms and with trembling legs forced herself to stand.

Her son needed her.

He *needed* her.

And she wasn't going to fail him. No matter how much each step towards the main room made her head spin.

She made it to the door and leant against the wall as she looked out to the sparsely-decorated room.

Dena was on the old armchair Distro had found for her, rocking Little Demon back and forth and whispering comforting words to him as Distro and Ka'harja sorted through their mail on the nearby table.

They all seemed very focused, but as Stars shifted a floorboard creaked and Ka'harja's ear gave a twitch and he glanced up to meet her eye.

'Stars!' he gasped, hurrying over to help hold the woman steady. 'You shouldn't be walking around—'

'My berr needs me,' Stars interrupted, her tone surprisingly firm through its nauseous quiver. 'I have to tell him everything is going to be okay.'

An unsure look passed over Ka'harja before he glanced back at his mother and swallowed; the bump in his throat bobbing in a nervous way.

'Not until you're sanitary,' Distro said, twice as firm as Stars had been. 'You've just had your face on a toilet— Ka, Sweetheart, sit her down.'

Ka'harja helped guide Stars to the couch beside Dena's chair as Distro hurried to a shelf and retrieved a jar of clear liquid.

'What is that?' Stars asked, jerking her head back at the pungent alcoholic smell as Distro unscrewed the lid and began lathering Stars' arms in it. 'It's giving me a headache!'

‘It’s hand sanitiser,’ answered Distro. ‘It kills germs. I made it myself, so I know it works.... Hold still, now! The sooner I’m done the sooner you can hold your boy.’

Stars, reluctantly, did as she was told and sat still as Distro rubbed the sharp-smelling salve into her skin.

‘I don’t like this,’ she said aloud. ‘It smells bad.’

‘Really? I like the smell,’ replied Ka’harja.

‘*You’d like tisi’maar,*’ Dena mumbled under her breath; blushing and averting her gaze when everyone in the room looked at her.

Distro gave a humoured snort, then, and released Stars’ arm to step over to the very embarrassed-looking Dena.

‘Come on,’ Distro said as she took Little Demon. ‘Give him here. There we go.’

Stars leant forward eagerly as Distro approached, holding out her arms to take her son as quickly as possible. And once she had him she leant back, slipping down backwards until she was lying on the couch with him cradled against her chest.

As soon as he was wrapped in her arms Little Demon’s wailing quietened down into an unhappy-but-hushed babbling.

It was like he was trying to talk to her, Stars thought as she met his eye. *But he didn’t know how to use words, yet.*

‘I know, my little berr,’ she said as she leant forward to peck a kiss on his forehead... then she flopped back down with an uneasy spin of her stomach as her nausea returned.

‘Oh, don’t throw up on the *baby,*’ Ka’harja mumbled, his hand finding its way between Stars and her son as if to shield him. ‘That won’t end well for *anyone!*’

‘He needed me,’ was the only response Stars could muster. ‘He was crying because he needed me.’

The thought panged at her heart.

Her Little Demon had needed her. And she'd almost been too sick to go to him.

But he'd *needed* her! He'd needed her so much he had been wailing and crying for her; only quietening down once he was in her arms.

He loved her.

A warm, wet line fell down Stars' cheek and Distro quickly wiped it away.

'You're a good mother,' she told the nurlak.

'He needed me,' Stars repeated.

'Yes, he did,' Distro confirmed. 'And you came out for him. Even when you're feeling so miserable, yourself. You're a *good mother*.'

'Yeah!' Ka'harja agreed, his hand finding Stars' head so he could pet her playfully. 'Naw, look at that little fucker. Already falling asleep.... Lucky bastard.'

'We'll leave you two alone,' Distro chuckled, batting Ka'harja's hand from Stars' head before motioning for him to go sit back at the table. 'Dena? Come join us.'

'Join you in what?' the nurlak responded, her eyes tightening suspiciously as she watched the foxens return to their seats. 'Sorting the mail? Distro— You know I can't read.'

'Yes, but you're good company,' Distro replied, pulling out a letter from the pile and huffing. 'Another from the E.D.R, this one looks like it's a list of food banks.'

'Well, it's nice of them,' Ka'harja shrugged, skimming over his own letter and then sliding it over to Distro. 'Another of your clients, they said they're happy to wait for the refund on their order. Eighth Child, I didn't expect this much clean-up. I thought once we got to town it'd be *done!*'

'Well... technically, I could have had the E.D.R settle my client debts...' a deep pink spread across Distro's cheeks, then, and she looked to the floor with a sad and embarrassed look as she trailed off.

Stars saw Distro wring her hands anxiously under the table... and realised she wasn't the only one who noticed it, as Dena got up and hurried over to sit beside her; their knees brushing together as they shifted close.

'That's... that's a service they offer,' Distro continued, and Stars saw her take Dena's hand and give it a squeeze. 'But I don't know. It just didn't feel right. I've spent so long building my clients' trust. Letting someone else take over, even for something like this, just.... I don't like the idea of it.'

Another of Dena's hands joined the comforting squeeze, and Distro let out a long breath.

She used her free hand to sift through the mail; and then picked up a small parcel and held it out to Ka'harja. 'It's from Coff,' she told him.

'Coff?!' Ka'harja snatched the parcel with excitement, and began examining it all over. 'Oh! I was *so* worried he wasn't going to make it to the next town—'

'Why wouldn't he?' Dena rolled her eyes. 'He does it every year!'

'*Shush,*' Distro batted at Dena under the table... and then gently rested her hand on the woman's knee.

Stars felt her ears prick up and twitch at what she saw.

That was a very unusual thing for her mother to allow. *Very* unusual!

Had Distro been doing that before today? Stars tried to recall the two women's interactions. She knew they'd spent a lot of time together, even before they'd gotten to town, but.... *Maybe sharing a bed with Distro had softened her to the idea of Distro touching her? The knee was a very unusual place to touch. Though, maybe that was just where Distro touched her friends?*

But then one of Dena's hands rested atop Distro's, gently thumbing over the little green scales that had grown over her skin, and Stars got the feeling that something

about their interaction was different. She thought it looked a lot like how Annanyn would rest her hand on Sken's, when Sken and her sat together at dinner.

'Well, if I'm going to get an *attitude!*' Ka'harja gave a humoured scoff and rose from his seat. 'Then I'm moving to the bedroom to open this!'

'Oh, Sweetheart, don't be so dramatic!' Distro returned the scoff, waving her hand at her son as he made for the stairs. 'Ka'harja! *Ka'harja!*'

Little Demon let out a babble as Distro raised her voice, and Stars gently ran a hand over his back to comfort him. '*Shh*, it's okay,' she comforted. 'You don't need to be lenta. You're safe. I promise.'

'Ah, sorry,' Distro lowered her voice again. 'He's alright?'

Stars nodded (slowly, to avoid making herself queasy again) and then let her head lay back down on the arm of the couch. 'I don't like feeling miita like this. It's mup. The most mup. I hate it. At least when my miita was bruises I knew how long it would hurt for.'

'You'll feel better tomorrow,' Distro reassured (though Stars thought she saw Dena cast her a doubtful look) before picking up more of her mail and looking through it. 'You've had a reaction to one of the medications, but it's nothing to be concerned about.'

'I still don't like it,' said Stars. 'I—'

There was a knock at the door, and Stars cut off to twitch an ear in its direction.

'Maybe if we ignore them they'll go away?' Distro said, humoured.

'We can hope,' Dena agreed in a not-so-humoured way.

But then the knock sounded again and Distro heaved a sigh; pushing herself to her feet and making her way over to greet their visitor.

‘Yes, yes! I’m coming!’ she called as she reached the door and yanked it open. ‘Can I help you?’

She was met by a stout foxen man with curly silver-and-black hair and a bright red shirt.

Stars watched him as he faltered, a deep blush creeping over his cheeks as he met eyes with Distro and his previously-confident demeanour turned into a jelly-like nervousness.

‘Yes, uh— Hi, I’m Ketika. Ketika Fio,’ he greeted. ‘M-My husband and I have just moved in next door and, well. He’s at work right now but I thought I might... pop in? Say hello to the new neighbours? I... Do you live here? *You?* I mean I’d heard about you from some people at the tavern but I didn’t realise I’d be next door to.... *You really live here?*’

Distro took in a deep, deep breath, holding it for a second before letting it out through her nose in a slow and deliberate way. ‘You can ask me *two* questions,’ she said firmly.

‘Did you really call Klict?’ he blurted, and even from the distance Stars thought she could see his eyes sparkling.

‘Yes,’ Distro answered curtly. ‘A Har’py attacked my family, and I shifted to protect them— Keep that in mind when you talk with them, because I won’t tolerate anyone treating them like shit! *Next question?*’

Ketika looked taken aback for a moment, his eyes darting behind Distro so he could look to Dena and Stars. Then, he looked back to Distro. ‘I thought... you were meant to turn back after.’

‘That’s not a question,’ said Distro. ‘But I’ll give it to you for free, anyway; I’ve got *no* fucking clue. The top theory is that it’s because I’m half wolvern.’

‘Oh, that’s why you’re so pale, right?’

‘Is that *really* your second question?’ Distro asked, half shutting the door.

‘What— No!’ Ketika blushed as he held up his hands

submissively. 'I— I'm sorry! I've upset you. I can tell. That wasn't my intention, I.... I'm sorry. I really didn't expect to see you. *You!* Of all people! I was expecting just a... a regular person as my neighbour—'

Distro shut the door in his face.

'Kekik Distro!' Stars gasped. 'That was very rude!'

'No, you know what's rude?' Distro snorted, her ears pressing back as she looked over to Stars. 'Saying I'm not a "regular person" and treating me different just because of the way I look! *That's* rude!'

Stars couldn't disagree with that; she'd learnt that treating someone differently because of how they looked was very, very hurtful. Annanyn had explained it all to her, when she'd first met Sken and said some very rude things.

'*Regular person,*' Distro grumbled as she returned to the table. '*I'll show him a regular person....*'

'Maybe he didn't know it was rude?' Stars tried. She hoped that their new neighbour wasn't the sort of person who liked to be *deliberately* rude.

'*Eeeeh!*' Distro waved a dismissive hand and sat down heavily next to Dena; hefting herself into the too-tall seat. 'Too many people don't know it, in this fucking town.'

Chapter 4:

Yune 1st, Minda

Year 10,053 AE

(Under Ka'harja's Arm; Bed)

It had been a long, restless night in the Nigelle-Beesa household, and Stars still hadn't managed to fall asleep because she'd been thinking too much.

So many thoughts kept flitting about in her head that she wasn't even sure where to *start* with them. So many thoughts, and all of them confusing ones that made her chest ache and her palms sweat and her head spiral like a spin-top.

She thought of her old troop members. The warriors, like Lah'kort. And Kay'oten. And Reak'nak. And Fre'jar. The ones who would shout and yell and hit and bite. Who made her so scared, and cold, and shaky with their anger and their violence.

And she thought of the others who were treated like her. Who hadn't been able to run away like she had done. Like Zi'na. And Hya'ti. And Al'har. The ones who were still there. Who were still stuck with those scared, shaky, cold feelings.

She wished she could go back and save them all, but she knew there wasn't much she could do. All she'd been able to do was tell that man from the Empire Disaster Relief about them. And though he promised he'd send someone to try and help, he'd seemed doubtful; the program could only help people who were already in the Empire, he'd said. If they were still on Heck'ne land then there was nothing they could do, legally, to save them.

It made Stars' stomach churn with guilt.

Sure, *none* of her troop had treated her well—not even the other low-ranking nurlak wanted to know her, because of her hakalika head— but she still didn't want

them to be in pain. She didn't want them to be scared, and lonely, and suffering.

No.

She wanted to save them. To free them.

She wanted them all to experience the wonderful feelings she'd felt, travelling with the caravan.

Hm....

The caravan.

Stars missed the caravan.

Sure. Things were better, now that she lived in Kokako Boaka.

She were clean. And had clothes that fit. And somewhere warm and dry to sleep. The Empire Disaster Relief program had even spoken to the local library and offered to assign someone to help her continue learning to read, if she wanted the help.

And it wasn't just her, either. Little Demon was getting stronger.

Ka'harja and Distro were preparing to start work again.

Even Dena's eyes had a gleam of health to them; one that Stars had never seen before. Not in her whole life.

Things were better in town. Everyone kept saying so, so they had to be!

But... Stars wasn't sure what to think about it. Because, despite what everyone kept saying about it, things didn't actually *feel* all that much better.

It was like the days were passing them by at a snail's pace. Everyone was restless, and self-conscious, and lonely.

They were all so lonely.

Dena still had no friends.

Distro had to cover her face, just to go to the markets for food (and it didn't even help; people still recognised her and stared in that rude and obnoxious way).

And Ka'harja missed Coff. He spent days at a time

ping for him; just waiting for word.... It was something Stars felt all too familiar with.

Oh, she missed Fabecut. She missed him so much.

Why did he have to leave? She let out a sigh. Then, she tensed as another thought poked at her brain. *Why did he leave me behind?*

She sat up, hurriedly, and felt Ka'harja's arm fall from her side as she covered her mouth and shuddered.

Why didn't he take me with him?

The thought gripped her and, though she tried to push it away, it refused to leave her be.

Ka'harja was able to help me. Ka'harja hadn't hesitated, even when he'd had so much more to lose, so why couldn't—

Stars rose to her feet and began pacing, anxiously rubbing her arms as she took in a shaky breath and tried, desperately, to stop her head from thinking those thoughts.

There had to be a reason, she told herself. Fabecut wouldn't have left me behind if he didn't have to. He would have taken me, if he could— He said there was reason he couldn't. Wasn't there? What... what was it, again?

Stars bit her lip, the speed of her pacing increasing as she tried to remember what Fabecut had said to her the night he'd left her.

He was... going somewhere. He was going to... somewhere else. But where? Where was he going?! Why couldn't she remember? Had he even told her where?

Stars heaved a long, heavy sigh as she heard Little Demon give a quiet blubber, and felt all of her negative thoughts fade away as she was distracted by her son. She knew if she didn't feed him he would get louder, then louder and louder, until he woke up everyone. So she made her way to his cot and, feeling her heart flutter with joy as he smiled up at her, picked him up and held him comfortably in her lower arms so she could pull up her shirt and feed

him.

Though he latched on, he seemed much more interested in grabbing at her hair.

His grip was getting stronger. Though his legs were still weak as he kicked out and wiggled.... But that was okay.

He wasn't going to be killed for it, here.

Stars liked that thought.

Her Little Demon was safe, here. He didn't *need* to be strong. People would help him, just like people were helping her. *Just like the caravan had helped her.*

Stars felt her mood drop at that thought. Even though it hadn't really been a sad one— It still made her feel sad.

The caravan had been so nice. They had understood her. She didn't feel so out of place like she did here in town; *here* she felt like she was an outsider, and that everyone was judging her for who she used to be. But in the caravan they had loved her for who she was, and had wanted to help her grow....

She missed them. *Maybe even more than she missed Fabecut.*

Stars rubbed at her face with her free hands, letting out a low groan.

She needed to go for a walk to clear her head. She hadn't been outside since she'd gotten her vaccinations (she'd been far too sick to leave the house) and it was making her feel weird and wrong and upset.

So, still gently cradling her Little Demon, she made her way downstairs and slipped on her shoes.

Shoes.

Shoes.

Shoes were such strange things.

She appreciated them for protecting her feet from the sharp rocks on the town's cobbled paths. But she didn't like that she couldn't feel the grass and the dirt between her

toes.

But, then, she wasn't going to be walking on the grass; she was going to stay within the town borders where the stone paths lay. So the shoes would be helpful.

Otherwise the hard rocky ground felt too much like Heck'ne... and that was a familiarity she didn't want, tonight.

Stars pushed the thought to the back of her mind and slipped out into the street. The dim blue light of the soulstone streetlamps illuminated the ground where she walked.

She was halfway to the marketplace when Little Demon unlatched from her breast and gave a happy squeal; reaching for her face.

'My most mip berr,' she whispered, lifting him up to kiss his nose. *'Kosson. Kosson.'*

It was a shame the library wasn't open at this hour, she thought. If it was, she could have gone and found a book to read to her Little Demon. Something for them both, to keep both their minds occupied and stave off the sad and lonely thoughts.

Another happy squeal from her son and she lifted him higher; blowing a raspberry on his belly before placing him over her shoulder and patting his back until he burped.

She didn't remove him from the embrace, even after she finished petting him, and held him close as she continued through the streets.

She was glad she had her son. He made everything she'd been through worth it, and she would give him every opportunity she could to make sure he grew up happy.

Even if she had to do it without his yalfit.

She shook the hurtful thought from her mind and continued on; instead trying to focus on a happy memory.

Coborn.

Coborn had been such a good friend.

She would often let Stars sit with her as she cooked; explaining each ingredient and its purpose to the dish as she prepared and added them. She had been so patient, and so soft-spoken, and funny. And she listened to what Stars had to say, genuinely seeming to care in a way that nobody else had ever cared before.

Oh, she missed Coborn so much.

She missed *everyone* in the caravan.

Coborn. And Annanyn. And Sken. And Baku and Koko. And Felelor, Naranako, and Coff. Trat, and Lif, and Krarf. And she even missed Denni and Tayal and Werani, though she knew they were more Distro's friends than Sken's.

She missed them all.

She missed everyone she'd known....

Fabecut, and Ta'lak, and Al'har, and Zi'na.

She even missed Lah'kort.

The thought was so sudden it made her pause where she stood.

She missed... Lah'kort.

Slowly, Stars closed her eyes and let out a long, sorrowful sigh.

She missed Lah'kort.

'I miss Lah'kort.'

Somehow, hearing what she was feeling aloud helped it not feel so confusing. Like speaking it had untangled it from the mess of thoughts in her head and put it down in front of her to process.

Lah'kort may have been horrible to her, but he was still a part of her family.

He was her father, and her brother (and her uncle, too, her mother had told her). He had always been a constant in her life— Not a pleasant constant, but now that he was gone, things felt so strange and different and *weird*.

She wished he had been kinder to her.

She couldn't understand how he had become what he was. How he could be like the rest of the Har'py troop they had been trapped in. Not when everyone else she had ever known from their family had been so loving.

Stars felt Little Demon wiggle, then, and lifted him off her shoulder so he could look into her eyes and she could see his big beautiful smile.

'How could anyone with so much of our blood in them be so cruel?' she muttered; though she wasn't actually asking her son such a hard-to-answer question. Instead, she simply sighed and thought of Ka'harja. 'Well... Kay'oten was awful, too. And Ka'harja is such a nice person. Maybe blood isn't as important as everyone always told me.... Distro doesn't seem to think it's very important at all, and she's one of the smartest people I know.... Hm.... I think she might be right.'

Little Demon, clearly not understanding what was being said, made a grab for his mother's ear and squealed in joy.

Stars let him tug her ear into his mouth, feeling herself smile as she pulled him close and pecked a kiss on his nose. 'You are my most important and mip little berr. I love you. Kosson. Never forget how much I kosson you, my Little Demon.'

She continued her walk, talking to her son as she did.

By the time she had walked around the markets and back home, she had started feeling a little bit better.... But still, she wasn't tired. So she sat on the front step of their house and looked up at the stars.

They weren't as bright here as they had been when she was with the caravan. She'd read that bright streetlights dimmed the night sky; that was why the town used such low-lit lamps. Enough to light the roads, but not enough that the stars would hide away from sight....

'Hey, you alright?'

Stars twitched an ear, glancing towards the voice that

had spoken to her.

There was a man standing at their next door neighbour's gate; a hand on the latch as if he had been halfway through unlocking it before noticing her.

Stars stared at him for a long moment, taking in his dark skin and hair and his slender form hidden under chain-mail, before she sighed and looked back to her son without answering his question.

Little Demon grabbed at her hair, giggling as she gave him a weak smile— And then suddenly the man was sitting beside her.

'Hey,' he repeated, softer this time. 'You alright?'

'Yi,' Stars replied. 'I think so.'

'That's good,' he said, his voice taking on that soft, almost condescending tone that Stars had heard from far too many people since moving to town. 'I'm glad you're alright—'

'I'm not stupid,' Stars interrupted, an impatient edge to her tone. 'I understand what you're saying, so you can talk to me like I'm a person instead of talking to me like I'm an animal who can't speak International.'

'Oh— Uh,' the man seemed taken aback, and quickly glanced around as if looking for the thought he'd lost. 'Right.... Um. Well.... My name's Tenkata Fio. What's... yours?'

'Stars,' Stars answered. 'Beesa.'

'Stars Beesa?' he echoed. 'That's an interesting name.'

'Yi,' Stars replied. 'I chose it carefully.'

'You chose it?' he asked.

'Yi,' Stars confirmed. 'My name used to be something else, back when I was a Har'py. But now it's different. Just like I am.'

'Good different?' Tenkata asked.

'I think so,' Stars answered. Then, when her son kicked out and tugged on her hair, she smiled warmly and

offered the infant her thumb to chew. ‘I *hope* so.’

They sat together wordlessly for a long moment before Stars cast Tenkata a quick sideways glance.

He looked tired, Stars thought. *Like he’d also been up all night, just like she had.*

But she didn’t think too hard on it as she was distracted by her son grabbing at her again and blubbering for her focus.

Tenkata let out a small chuckle, adjusting his chain-mail shirt and putting down his sword on the step beside him. ‘It’s been a long night, huh?’ he said. ‘Quiet, thank the gods. Easy work at least.’

Stars’ ear twitched, though she didn’t look at him. ‘Easy work?’

‘Mm!’ Tenkata nodded. ‘Nobody caused any trouble. Honestly, for how big it is here, I was expecting my job to be a *lot* more hectic!’

‘What do you do for a job?’ Stars asked, looking back up to the man.

He flicked his shirt, as if that should have meant something, and then when Stars just looked confused he said; ‘I’m a guard. Y’know. Keep the peace?’

‘Oh.’

‘Mm.’

They sat in quiet for a while longer.

Then, Stars had a thought and twitched her ear. ‘Tenkata *Fio*,’ she said, slowly. ‘You live next door, don’t you?’

‘Yeah, you met my husband?’

‘Ketika?’ Stars guessed. Then, when Tenkata nodded she pressed back her ears and winced. ‘He was very rude to Kekik Distro.’

‘Oh?’ it was Tenkata whose ears twitched, now. And he frowned as he looked confused. ‘Was he?’

Stars nodded. ‘Yes. He said she wasn’t a “regular

person,” because she looks different. It’s rude to tell people they look different, even if it’s true. It’s not her fault she looks the way she does. She didn’t even mean to call Klict! It just happened to her, because Kay’oten wanted to hurt Ka’harja and me.’

Realisation hit Tenkata, then, and he mouthed a very quiet oh before a weak chuckle found its way out of him. ‘Is *that* why she slammed the door on him, then?’

Stars nodded again. ‘Yi.’

Tenkata’s chuckle grew louder, and he rubbed at his stubbled cheek. ‘Ah. I’m so sorry. He didn’t mean to offend her. He was just taken by surprise is all. Didn’t expect to see her, and didn’t know what to say.’

Stars thought she understood; there were many times she was surprised and said the wrong thing without knowing it was wrong.

But she didn’t dwell on it as, when she looked up from her son’s beautiful green eyes, she saw the sky above the rooftops was turning a light yellow-blue and blurted; ‘The sun’s rising.’

‘Hm?’ Tenkata followed her eyes to the horizon and grinned. ‘Oh, yeah. Look at that— That’s beautiful, isn’t it?’

‘Yi,’ Stars agreed. ‘Very beautiful. The sunrise never looked like that, in Heck’ne. There was too much dust in the air.’

‘Was there?’

‘Yi...’ Stars trailed off, watching the sky. Then, her ears drooped and she felt a sigh escape her. ‘It was so different in Heck’ne. Here is so much softer. People are so much more ready to be kind and help each other.... Like Ka’harja, and Distro, and Sken....’

Tenkata gave a tentative nod, clearly not *completely* understanding what Stars meant, but seeming to know she needed to say her thoughts out loud.

‘Why did you sit with me?’ Stars asked, her ears flicking up as she looked to him.

‘Huh? Oh,’ Tenkata shifted in place. ‘Well. I was worried.’

‘You were worried about me?’ Stars echoed.

‘Of course I was,’ Tenkata put a hand on hers. ‘I wanted to see if you needed any help. That’s all.’

‘But you don’t even know me!’ Stars blurted. Then, she looked to her son again and brushed a tuft of his hair from his eyes as her voice softened. ‘*Nobody* who has helped me has known me....’

Tenkata paused for a long moment, looking like he was thinking of how to reply *very* carefully, before he lent forward and dropped his focus to Little Demon’s smile. ‘Maybe we don’t know each other,’ he said, gently. ‘But we share something special.’

‘Really? What do we share?’

‘The world,’ Tenkata replied, simply.

‘The world?’ Stars twitched an ear. ‘But *everyone* shares the world!’

‘Exactly,’ Tenkata said. ‘That’s why we have to look out for everyone. Even if we don’t know them.’

For a long moment, Stars was quiet. She turned the thought over in her mind, over and over; processing it slowly before finally smiling. ‘I like that,’ she decided. ‘That’s a nice way to think about it.’

‘Mm,’ Tenkata gave a nod.

The look he gave Stars made her hesitate; unsure for a moment if he’d *really* meant what he’d said. But then he smiled, and held out his hand for Little Demon to take, and she was sure just by the look in his eyes as her son played with his fingers that he was a kind person. Even if he said things he didn’t mean.

‘Would you like to come in and eat breakfast with us?’ Stars asked, realising what she’d said only after she’d offered it. ‘Ka’harja won’t mind making more. Especially if I help him. I like helping him make breakfast. Your husband

can eat with us too, if he wants to. As long as he's not rude to Kekik Distro again.'

'I'd love that,' Tenkata said, smiling wide. 'My husband and I have only just moved in, here, so we haven't really had time to make many friends. It will be nice to share a meal.'

'Yi, I know how you feel,' Stars gave a nod. 'We've been here since Jasfe, and we don't have any friends yet, either.'

'That long?' Tenkata asked, his smiling falling in a sympathetic way. Then, when Stars nodded, his smile twitched back to the corners of his lips. 'Well... that just won't do, will it? Though I think I have a solution to *both* our problems.'

'Oh?' Stars twitched her ears curiously at his grin. 'What's that?'

He offered her his hand. 'Friends?'

A moment passed as Stars looked down at Tenkata's hand.... Then she smiled, and took it. 'Yi,' she said. 'I would like to be friends.'

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 Annany 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 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 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 comfortingly. 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 nosily; 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,’ Metitia 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 them for what happened with 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 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 Ketita 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 spattered 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 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 mis-matched 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. 'Abbtah,' 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 10:
Glif 5th, Minda
Year 10,053 AE
(The Nigelle Farm; Okatako)

The night was beautiful, and the air was cold and still. The near-cloudless sky above twinkled with stars, and the two almost-full moons lit up the world brighter than the colourful nebula behind them; washing the grassy field in silver and blue.

The third moon wasn't visible, as Stars stumbled through the strange doorway and gasped in awe at what she saw... but that was fairly normal, in Okatako.

Stars knew where she was the moment she smelt the wet grass and saw the shape of the mountains in the far distance. It was so familiar, and yet so alien— Like the halfway point between the world she'd grown up in and the one she lived in now.

The door behind her slammed, rather curtly, and she glanced back to see Rachel run her hand over it and open it again— And Stars gave another gasp.

The inside of the door was not where she had just been. Instead, it was different familiar room; one that had been destroyed many months ago. Five months, to be exact.

The kitchen of Ka'harja's house.

Stars stepped back, her gaze flicking over the old wooden house that she knew had burnt to the ground only half a year ago.

'*Five months away,*' she managed to breathe. 'Gighi, you— You took me five months away. It really *was* an answer...!'

Janet gave an enthusiastic nod, as Rachel shut the door again and dusted her hands.

'But— Portals can't do that!' Stars exclaimed. 'Portals

are supposed to go from one place to another, not through time! That's what the books said, when I read them. They said that not many portals can go through time! Only the strongest portal makers can make portals that go through time. And the ones that *can* go through time can *never* go backwards, only forwards! The books said its kizza possible, to go back in time!

Rachel just gave a humoured scoff. 'Well, it sounds like maybe your books are wrong—'

She cut off as there was a shout from inside; a familiar voice, that made Stars' heart leap to her throat.

'Ka'har—'

Rachel slapped a hand over Stars' mouth, holding her tight and still to quiet her.

'*Shh!*' she hissed, turning her gaze to the door as a muffled cry of pain came through it.

Distro's voice called out, her half-word almost completely unintelligible, as Janet pressed a finger to her lips in a motion for Stars to keep quiet.

'I'm fine!' Ka'harja's voice shouted, clearly lying through his teeth as the agony was clear in his voice.

'*He definitely does not sound fine,*' Rachel mumbled to herself, grimacing in a pained way.

Stars caught a glimpse of Ka'harja through the window as he limped out of the pantry— But only a glimpse, before she was yanked sideways and pressed between Rachel and the outside wall of the house, out of sight from the man inside.

Ka'harja's shadow stretched out over the grassy field, cutting a dark shape within the window's light, and Stars swallowed the lump in her throat as she realised with a strange sinking feeling that this Ka'harja didn't know her yet.

'*Try not to be seen, while we're here,*' Janet advised, leaning over to whisper in Stars' ear. '*It can make things complicated.... Once you're back in the right time you can*

say whatever you like about what you've seen. But until then, stay out of sight.'

Stars twitched an ear. She wasn't sure anyone would believe her if she told them about what was happening right now. She said a lot of strange things —things that were a lot less strange than this— and it was very rare for anyone to believe those things. So she didn't think people would believe her for this. They'd probably say it was a dream. Or that she was hakalika in the head— *Completely* ababhi!

The front door of the Nigelle's old house opened and shut, and the trio waited with bated breath as Ka'harja hesitated and glanced around.

'He can sense something's different,' Janet whispered. *'We should move, before he sees us.'*

'Hold,' Rachel ordered. *'He's not on picket duty; his instincts might sense the magic, but he's got no reason to think anything's wrong...'*

Ka'harja's ear twitched and his attention was drawn away as there was a terrible, agonised scream in the far distance that made Stars' blood run cold.

It was coming from the direction of the wasteland, and Stars trembled in horror at the sound of it.

'Block it out,' she heard Ka'harja whisper to himself. *'You can't help them. Just block it out and go do your job.'*

A shiver ran up Stars' spine, as Ka'harja let out a shaky breath and shook his head. And she watched as he hurried away into the direction he had been in, when they had first met.

None of the women moved until he was out of sight; it was only once they were sure he was gone that Rachel removed her hand from Stars' mouth.

'That was close,' Janet sighed, casting Stars a worried glance. *'I thought he was going to turn and see you! And that would mess up everything!'*

'He didn't know we were here,' Stars said simply; mostly to reaffirm to herself what was happening. She

twitched an ear, listening to the night. ‘I didn’t notice last time I was here, because I was giving birth, but it’s too quiet. There are no animals. Even the crickets are quiet. Usually there are birds and bugs making a lot of noise on nights like this. Why are they so quiet?’

‘Old magic scares them,’ Rachel commented. ‘And there’s a lot of it going around tonight. A little bit of me and my magic, but mostly it’s the fallen stars. They’re up there right now, moving into place above us, and the animals know it. Their instincts remember it from the old days.’

‘The old days?’ Stars echoed.

‘You were Har’py once, yes?’ Rachel asked. She grinned when Stars nodded. ‘So you’ve heard of the wizard, Rendi, and the stolen stars he turned into his children? The war of sky and dirt? It’s that same magic, from when the stars attacked the ground. Old and powerful, and the animals don’t want to be involved with it.’

Another scream filled the air, and Stars rubbed her arms, swallowing and feeling faint.

‘Are you alright?’ Janet asked, placing a kind hand on her shoulder. ‘You look ill.... Is that screaming... *you?*’

‘I was giving birth,’ she said, her ears folding down as she heard another cry of agony. ‘It was the most miita thing I’d ever been through. Even more painful than the other births with my other children. I didn’t realise I could be heard all the way over here. I was so far away, I didn’t know Ka’harja heard me.... He’s my first baby that wasn’t born dead. Do you think that’s why it hurt so much more?’

Janet looked sympathetic, though Rachel just placed her hands on her hips and made a disapproving face. ‘I didn’t realise he was born *tonight*. Hm. Well, I suppose that’s fate for you.’

‘Fate?’ Stars echoed. ‘How is him being born tonight *fate?*’

‘I can’t say,’ Rachel said, simply; motioning for the other women to follow her as she turned and started in the

direction opposite the one Ka'harja had gone. 'Because if I did, you might change what happens. And it needs to happen.'

'Why would I change what happens?' Stars asked. 'Is it a bad thing, that happens?'

'In the moment, you will think it's the worst thing to ever happen to you in your life,' Rachel answered. 'And, perhaps, it might be. But it *needs* to happen, or the world will be stagnant forever.'

Stars scrunched her face up, as Janet's hand on her shoulder became an arm around her back and she was gently guided after Rachel. 'I don't think I like you much,' it came out of her before she realised what she was saying, and she blushed deeply when she heard it.

'And, yet, you're still going to save my life,' Rachel chuckled. 'Don't worry, though, barely anyone who meets me likes me.'

'I like you,' Janet commented.

'I still don't know why!' it was a humoured exclamation, thrown casually over Rachel's shoulder, but Stars thought it hid some sort of other emotion— She was familiar with the tone of sadness that peeked through her words. Like she thought what she said was actually true and not a joke at all, but couldn't bare to admit it.

Janet cast Stars an uncomfortable glance; though it was short-lived as Rachel pressed on and picked up speed, and the two girls had to hurry after her.

They walked for what must have been at least an hour. Maybe two. It was hard to tell exactly what their pace was, in the hilly grassland. All Stars knew was she was relieved that her past-self's cries had disappeared into the distance.

'I think it's about here,' Rachel gave a sniff and slowed to a stop, before examining the ground, and then the sky, and then the ground again. 'Hm.... Yeah. Here. Come on, back up! Don't want it to land on you!'

‘Land on me?’ Stars felt the hair on the back of her neck stand on end. ‘You mean... the fallen stars?’

‘Yep! Back up, now! Top of the hill over there!’

Stars did as she was told; stepping clumsily backwards as Rachel ushered her uphill with a wide motion of her arms.

‘Up, up, up!’

‘Rachel!’ Janet gave a gasp and pointed to the sky above, and as Rachel turned, Stars’ eyes went wide as she saw the two familiar shooting stars, falling side by side in the colourful night.

They fell together for a moment, before one arced away to the left and the other began to drop, and grow—
And grow!

‘Brace!’ Rachel ordered, and Stars felt Janet grab her by the arm to hold her in place as the falling star approached them.

It fell to the ground with a flash of yellow light and a *BOOM* that was followed by a scream—a shriek of pain—and Stars saw a snake-like form rise from the stone as if trying to escape it. It lifted its many arms to the sky, grasping for the stars above and crying out:

‘My children!’

Rachel waved a hand, and a shimmering magic layered in the air around them; absorbing the force of the collision as it rippled out with a thundering rush of air that shot through the grass, sending a powerful and familiar wave through the field that Stars knew would soon collide with her past self.

‘I’m sorry!’ the creature from the stone wailed mournfully, flickering like a rainbow flame and buzzing with a bee-like sound. *‘I’m sorry!’*

And then it was pulled back to the stone; screaming in desperation to escape it.

Glowing stones that devoured the soul, Stars felt the

hair on the back of her neck stand on end as she recalled the old Har'py teaching.

She couldn't help but swallow down the lump in her throat as she glanced up and watched the second stone fall to the horizon; far away and out of view.

She didn't hear another cry like she had with the first one (though, perhaps that was because of the distance) but she watched as the second rush of air and force approached and passed her; bouncing harmlessly off Rachel's magic barrier.

A moment of silence passed, and Rachel dropped the magical shield; giving a loud sniff and crossing her arms as Janet glanced up at the sky.

'There they go,' Janet mumbled.

Stars followed her gaze curiously, wondering who she could possibly mean.... And it was then that she saw something else in the sky; something she had been in too much pain to see, the last time she found herself living through this night.

A row of blinking lights, too uniform to be regular stars, spinning in a whirl and shrinking further and further away into the distance.

Janet lifted a hand to her brow as she looked to the lights, as if shielding her eyes from a sunny day.

And Rachel just scoffed. *'At ease, soldier.'*

Janet rolled her eyes.

And Stars cocked her head, finding herself utterly bewildered by the strange women and their unusual conversation.

'Were those gods?' she asked.

'Were what gods?' Rachel retorted.

'You mean the lights?' Janet asked. *'Oh, no— Those were nurlak.'*

'Nurlak? In the sky?' Stars' ear twitched. *'Were they dead?'*

‘What?’

‘Were they dead?’ she repeated. ‘Ka’harja said that, when Animon die, Scara gives them glowing hair and turns them into stars. Those were stars in the sky, weren’t they? And if they were nurlak, then they must be dead.’

Janet bit her lip. ‘Well, they—’

‘Yeah, sure,’ Rachel interrupted. ‘You’re right. They’re dead.’

Janet cast Rachel a glance that Stars didn’t understand; though it was clearly expressing some sort of annoyance. Rachel shook her head, Janet furrowed her brow, and they had some sort of silent argument that ended in Janet throwing up her hands in defeat.

‘Yeah. They’re dead,’ she said, sounding like she didn’t want to say it.

It was very clear to Stars that it was a lie, but she didn’t think it was too wise to argue. Not with Rachel, at least. She reminded Stars of some of the people she’d known before —the kind of people that might have left her behind to fend for herself, if she disagreed one too many times— and she thought it was best to bite her tongue and pretend that Rachel’s dishonesty wasn’t blatantly obvious.

Seemingly content with Stars’ lack of argument, Rachel gave another haughty sniff and made her way downhill towards the crater left by the fallen star.

It was, considering the force the star had thrown out when it had landed, a rather small hole. Only twice as long as the stone, itself; and the stone was only as large as a loaf of bread.

Stars couldn’t believe it, as she followed after Rachel to peer at the stone.

It was glowing red-hot, with heat visibly rising from it and warping the air like a fire in the night.

Rachel stepped around it, waving a hand and muttering something in a language Stars didn’t understand, and the fallen star rapidly cooled; turning from a deep red

to a golden-bronze colour.

Stars recognised with a curious twitch of her ear that this was *soulstone*, and she wondered how it had turned yellow instead of blue.

Janet watched on with a tense expression, as Rachel cooled the crystal. 'Should we get the other—'

'No. We only need the one half of her,' Rachel said, simply. 'The other will make its own journey in time. For now, we don't *want* her at full strength. Do you remember how she was the last time we talked with her? And that was when she'd had time to calm down. She might actually kill us if we put the pieces back together now!'

She then knelt on one knee to pick up the stone, and whispered to it in that strange, near unintelligible language that Stars had never heard before now.

The stone's light dimmed to a dull glow, and Rachel's face twisted in a scowl.

'I thought so,' she muttered, her annoyance clear in her tone. 'She's not going to talk to us.'

'Why not?' Stars asked.

'We're human.'

Stars didn't think they looked human. But she wasn't going to argue that with these strange, powerful women. Not when she was five months away from home.

'I can't believe they jettisoned her,' said Janet as she stepped to Stars side and gave a mournful sigh.

'She jettisoned herself,' Rachel corrected, turning the stone in her hands. 'Didn't you? I know you sacrificed yourself, you altruistic bitch.'

'Rachel!'

Rachel ignored Janet's protest, instead pulling out a canvas bag from her pocket and slipping the stone inside. She held the bag out to Stars, who hesitated to take it.

'Take her,' Rachel told her, her voice firm and somewhat annoyed.

Stars' ears folded back, and her eyes tightened in distrust.

They had said they were paying back a favour, and that they wanted to save her son's life... but they hadn't told her anything else. And after all she'd seen, she wasn't sure she trusted Rachel. She didn't seem like a good person, with the things she'd said, and Stars didn't think she wanted to believe that her son was going to be in any sort of danger, at all... not after all the work she'd done to make him safe.

But then Janet's hand lay on her shoulder, and she felt herself heave a sigh as the woman cast her a resigned look.

She didn't really have a *choice* but to take the stone, did she?

'You said this will save Little Demon's life?' she asked out loud.

Rachel nodded.

'How?'

'I can't tell you that,' Rachel answered.

Stars crossed her arms —all four of them— and turned herself away. 'I'm not taking it. Not until you tell me what you mean.'

Rachel's annoyed expression turned to a scowl, and the feathers of her wings pricked up with her deep breath. She spoke through her teeth as she stepped towards Stars and pushed the fallen star into her side. 'I didn't waste all this magic just for you to get stubborn at the last minute.'

'Tell me how this will save my son,' Stars retorted, tightening her arms and trying not to tremble as Rachel gave her the same kind of look that Lah'kort would give her, when she would stay out too long at night when he wanted her home. 'Tell me. I want to know why my berr will be miita.'

'Take. Her.'

'Na.'

‘Take her!’

‘Na!’

Rachel’s jaw *clicked* audibly, as she licked her teeth and glowered at Stars. Then, she gave a defeated-but-frustrated sigh through her nose and growled, ‘Seven years,’ she said, her voice dripping with venom. ‘In seven years, he’s going to get sick. And she knows the cure.’

‘Seven years?’ Stars twitched her ear, her firm expression faltering. ‘If he’s going to be sick in seven years, why have you come to me now? Why would you do this to me now, and give me so much time to worry?’

‘Because now is the only time you’ll be willing to listen to us,’ Janet answered, her hand squeezing Stars’ shoulder gently. ‘If we came to you later, when he was sick already, you would be grieving too much to trust us.’

‘Take the *fucking* stone, Stars,’ Rachel growled, forcing the bag into the nurlak’s arms and turning away. ‘Come on. We’ve wasted enough time standing around; it’s time you went home.’

Stars let out a breath and shivered as Rachel turned away from her— And she felt Janet’s hand give her a comforting pat before the woman helped her sling the bag with the stone in it onto her shoulder to carry.

None of them said anything on the walk back to Ka’harja’s old house; though Rachel held up a hand to signal them to keep quiet, as there was a surprised shout.

‘*GIGHI!* WHAT IS THAT?! IT’S HUGE!’

Janet took Stars’ arm and pulled her back behind the hill they had almost stepped over; holding her back as the trio peeked over carefully to watch the familiar scene play out in front of them.

Stars felt her heart pang.

It had only been five months, but looking at herself— She was in a terrible state. She was clearly exhausted, and out of her mind from the pain of birth and lack of sleep and tiny food rations she’d been surviving off.

It broke her heart to see herself in such a way, and she realised she liked what she'd been seeing in the bathroom mirror of their new house much much better than the woman she saw now.

She watched in silence as her past self was let inside, and then heaved a sigh as Janet took her by the arm again to lead her down the hill.

They found their way to the back door, and as Rachel began running her hand over it, Stars heard the loud conversation going on inside and made sure to keep herself away from the windows.

She wrung her hands as Janet rubbed her back, and they both watched as Rachel silently worked on the door.

'Stars,' Janet whispered, leaning close to Stars' ear so that the occupants inside the house couldn't hear her. *'Listen, I'm sorry we can't tell you everything. We have our reasons, please trust us about that— We really do just want to help you, and don't mean to confuse you.'*

Stars gave a slow, unsure nod; wanting to trust Janet, but unsure if she did.

'You're going to change the world with your kindness, Stars,' Janet told her as Rachel stepped away from the door and let out a long breath. *'You've already done more than you could ever imagine. So, please, don't forget who you are. Even when it gets hard.'*

Stars didn't understand; but she didn't have time to question Janet, before Rachel turned around and cleared her throat.

'Stars?' Rachel asked, beckoning the woman over.

Stars gave a frustrated ear-flick of acknowledgement, as Janet nudged her towards the other woman. 'Yi, Rachel?'

'Tell Distro we're sorry about Luana,' Rachel said, softly; seemingly genuine as her voice grew sad. 'She had to get hurt, to stop him from.... It's a bad timeline, but it was better than the alternative.'

Stars opened her mouth to question Rachel's meaning, but before she could the woman yanked open the door she'd enchanted and pushed Stars through.

Stars stumbled as the door was slammed behind her, and fell to the ground with a cry that was echoed by a surprised and familiar shriek.

For a moment, Stars lay stunned. And then the door she'd come through opened again and the surprised shriek screamed once more, and Stars realised that it was Ka'harja she'd heard and quickly rolled over to look at him.

He was sitting on the toilet, a horrified and haunted look in his eyes as he looked from Stars to the bathroom door and back.

'*Wha—*' his voice was a high-pitched squeak of confusion. '*Wha— Wha— That was outside?!*'

'Stars!' Distro's own voice exclaimed from the open bathroom door, filled with worry, and Stars turned to see that she looked just as haunted as her son. '*Where have you been?!* We've been worried sick about you!'

'I was—'

'You can't just *run off* on us, Stars!' Distro snapped, rushing over to throw her arms around the nurlak. 'We thought something had *happened* to you! Where were you? And how did you get in here without me seeing you, I was on the couch, how did you— Where *were* you?!

'I was—'

'STARS!' Dena's shriek cut her daughter off, and her arms were suddenly wrapped around Stars tightly. 'Stars! Oh, Zen'efay, I thought something had happened to you! I thought you were miita— Or worse— Don't! Don't you *ever* worry me like this again!' she pulled away, gripping her daughter's face and meeting her eye as she scolded her, and Stars saw she had been crying. 'Tirr basaka terr kunya! Tirr lenta! Basaka tarr miita! Basaka tarr zi'kaf! Or worse! Tirr lenta! Tirr mup lenta, Stars! I was so frightened for you! Alik hakalika! Broja'kar! Tell me where you have

been! Now! Broja'kar!

Stars was too stunned to answer her mother.

Taken? Hurt?

What was she talking about?

Why was everyone acting like this?

She had only been gone for a few hours— That wasn't unusual, for her. She would go out on her own all the time....

'Broja'kar, Stars!' Dena snapped, her breath shaking as she choked on a sob. 'Where? *Where?! I thought you were dead, Stars! I thought you were dead! Where were you?!*

'I was...' Stars paused, expecting to be cut off again; though when she wasn't she swallowed and continued. 'I was in the past.'

'What?!' Dena snapped.

'I was in the past,' Stars repeated, flinching at her mother's horrified look. 'I... I'm confused. Why is everyone so upset? I've only been gone a little while. A few hours at most.'

Distro shook her head at Stars, as Dena stepped away and covered her face with all four of her hands.

'Oh, you're going hakalika like Ta'lak,' Dena whispered under her breath, and Stars felt her heart squeeze painfully.

'I'm not hakalika; it's true,' she said. 'I went five months away. Back to the night Little Demon was born.'

Dena shook her head again, seemingly at a loss for words, before retreating out of the room with a sob.

Stars made to follow, rising to her feet and taking two steps, before Distro cut her off and blocked her way.

'Wait, wait!' she exclaimed, frowning her brow as Stars looked down at her. 'Stars, wait. Give her a moment.'

'I don't understand!' Stars said. 'Why is everyone being so strange? Why was Kekik so worried? I was only gone for the night— I do that all the time!'

‘The night?’ the sound of the toilet flushing made Stars twitch her ear, and she turned to Ka’harja as he washed his hands. ‘Stars, you were gone a *lot* longer than *one* night!’

‘A’la’ha?’ Stars cocked her head. ‘Na?’

‘*Yeah*,’ Ka’harja retorted.

For a moment, Stars stared at Ka’harja. Then, she twitched an ear and realised that the rain had stopped. Not only that, but the air felt dry and warm. Strange, for the day after such a heavy storm....

She felt her skin crawling, as she looked from Distro, to Ka’harja, to the window that let in light from the orange-and-red sunset outside.

‘I was gone for more than a day,’ she realised aloud. ‘How long have I been gone?’

‘Ten days,’ Distro said, carefully. ‘It’s the fifteenth— You’ve been gone for ten days.’

‘Ten days?’ Stars managed. She found it hard to believe.... Though, she found everything that had just happened to her hard to believe. ‘It was only a few hours, for me. I went to the past. Janet and Rachel took me. Maybe they put me too far forward by accident—’ she cut off as she thought of how annoyed Rachel had been at her, and wondered if it might *not* have been accidental.

Distro crossed her arms, at mention of the girls. ‘Janet and Rachel, you say?’

‘Yi,’ Stars nodded. ‘Two women. They said they were human, but they had wings like someone from the Rendi. Blue and purple. They opened a portal in the bathroom door, and took me back to the night Little Demon was born.’

‘Mm.’

‘I’m not *hakalika*!’ Stars defended, her voice turning pleading. ‘They were real people, not in my head! They were!’

Ka'harja's hand placed on Stars' shoulder, and he gave her a comforting pat. 'I believe you,' he said.

'I don't... not believe *you*,' Distro agreed, in a very cautious way. 'But I don't know if I... believe *it*.'

'I'm not lying!' Stars exclaimed. 'Na maka! Na!'

Distro raised a hand to silence Stars, and gave her a look that was as pensive as it was sympathetic. 'I don't think you're lying. And I don't think you're crazy,' she reassured. 'But I don't know if you saw what you thought you did; if *you* were the one lied to. Janet and Rachel— They're not real. Well, there's never been anything to prove they are, anyway.'

Stars cocked her head, and gave Distro a confused look. A short, frustrated whine escaped her as the foxen shrugged, and she wrung her hands. 'I don't understand, Kekik Distro. Do you know Janet and Rachel?'

'I've heard of them before, yes,' Distro said, with a disbelieving sigh. 'You can read about them at the library, if you like; myths and legends section. Janet and Rachel are supposedly two pests who jump through time and cause problems.... The chances that it was *actually* them is next to impossible. Even if they *do* exist, they've only been spotted during what people say are "significant shifts in destiny"— You know, stuff like the births of heroes or the turning points of wars.... It was most likely just some troublemakers pretending to be them. But either way, no matter who they are, they're just looking to cause problems. Don't listen to a *thing* they've said to you!'

Stars wasn't sure if what Distro said made her relieved, or even more anxious.

Shifts in destiny....

Like someone being born? Or someone leaving everything they knew behind and changing their entire life, all in one night?

Or like... saving someone's life?

'They said they wanted to save Little Demon's life,'

Stars blurted. She shifted the bag on her shoulder, then, and pulled out the glowing yellow stone to show to her family. 'They took me back to the day he was born, and we watched the stars fall again,' she held the stone out to Distro, taking a knee so she could look the woman in the eyes as her pleading tone returned. 'There's a person inside the stone. They said Little Demon is going to get very sick, and that she's going to know how to make him better.'

Distro's lips pursed, tight and thin, and she looked conflicted. Like she didn't want to believe Stars was lying or crazy; but like the idea of the alternative made her even more uncomfortable and she didn't want to think it was true.

Stars couldn't blame Distro for not wanting to believe her. *She* almost couldn't believe what had happened to her! If it wasn't for the fallen star in her hand, she might have dismissed it as a strange dream.

'They knew your name,' Stars commented.

'At this point, who in town *doesn't* know my name?' Distro huffed.

'They knew that I know you—'

'Stars, the amount of times we've been seen together...' Distro shook her head. 'I don't doubt you've been shown something; but I doubt that what they showed you was really the past—'

'They took me to the day the stars fell!' Stars pressed, desperate for Distro to believe her. 'I saw your old house— I saw *me!* I saw *myself*, sick and tired and dirty! That wasn't fake! They couldn't have made a fake me! They couldn't have made it say the things I said! Nobody else knew what I said! Nobody else but Kekik and Ka'harja! Kekik doesn't talk to anyone, so they wouldn't have heard it from her! And Ka'harja's forgotten every word! So he can't have told anyone!'

Ka'harja gave an anxious nod, as Stars motioned at him. 'She's right,' he confirmed. 'I don't remember a thing.'

Distro squeezed her eyes shut, frustrated creases pressing into her brow as she looked pained and anxious. She turned her whole body from Stars, as if trying to escape her miserable gaze but refusing to physically walk out on her.

Stars felt her heart pounding, and her lip trembling, as she watched the woman struggle to believe her.

‘Kekik Distro?’

Distro let out a breath and opened her eyes, glancing sideways at Stars. ‘You said they knew my name?’

‘Yi,’ Stars confirmed. ‘They told me to tell you...’

‘Tell me what?’

‘That they’re sorry about... Luana?’ Stars’ own brow furrowed as she tried to recall *exactly* what they’d said. ‘And... that she had to get hurt, because it was the better version of things that had to happen?’

Distro gave a scoff, and threw her hands up in an exaggerated way. ‘Who the *fuck* is Luana?! I’ve never met anyone called “Luana”! What crock! What absolute fucking crock! Don’t believe a *thing* they’ve said to you!’

Though Distro’s words were harsh, Stars thought she heard a tinge of fear in her voice. An anxiety, of what might be to come.

That was when Dena returned to the bathroom; her eyes freshly-red from another bout of crying and a guilty — almost stunned to vacant— look on her face.

She stood in the doorway for a moment before stepping to the side and glancing behind her... and Stars gasped when she saw her son; held firm but gentle in the arms of a strange foxen woman as she nursed him.

At her gasp, Little Demon looked up, unlatched from the woman’s breast, and reached out his arms towards his mother. He let out a miserable wail as he grabbed at the air, and Stars dropped the fallen star, letting it fall to the floor with a heavy *thump!* as she rose from her kneel and rushed over to take up her son and embrace him tight.

‘Shh! Shh!’ she comforted as she bounced him. ‘I’m here. Don’t cry. Na tiirl. I’m here. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to leave you. I’m sorry. Na tiirl, farfah katka. I’m here.’

Chapter 11:

Yune 15th, Yieda

Year 10,053 AE

(The Main Room; the Nigelle-Beesa House)

Cerulia was a strong woman, despite her foxen size. Deceptively, even, with her lean stature. She had no issue carrying Little Demon; she picked him up like he weighed nothing. Which, considering his size compared to her, was rather impressive.

Like most people in town, she had dark skin. Though unlike most people in town, she had an even darker birthmark covering half of her face, trailing partway down her neck. Her hair was a deep blue-green, with brighter tips on the end that gave it a stunning sheen that glimmered each time she turned her head—a movement that was done as sharp as the rest of her motions—and her ponytail flicked like a whip.

She was a *wet nurse*, Stars had been told. Someone who had come to feed her son while she was missing. Stars understood the purpose; she had done similar back in Heck'ne once, when she was pregnant with one of her miscarriages and another troop-mate's milk had dried up before their daughter had been fully weaned. But it still made her feel terrible. Like she had failed as a mother and abandoned her son.... She knew, really, that she hadn't. But mean and guilty feelings in her mind kept poking at her, trying to convince her that she had. And it was hard to shake those feelings away.

Especially when Stars had seen how quickly Cerulia had seemed to adapt to her son's schedule; she navigated the household with ease. She seemed to know exactly when the boy would be hungry or tired, even before Stars did, and she hadn't hesitated to point out his needs to the nurlak....

But, then, even though Cerulia's pointed looks and blunt tone-of-voice had initially made Stars flinch like she was being scolded, the woman had so far been very kind. She had handled Little Demon gently, and reassured Stars she was not in any trouble. That whatever had happened to her, she clearly had not intended to leave her child for so long.

Despite the reassurances, it had been a restless night for everyone. Cerulia (much like Dena) had seemed uncomfortable with Stars' insistence that she had visited the past, and had decided to stay overnight until they were able to see Metitia in the morning. *Just in case.*

Stars had felt her stomach flip as those words had been ever-so-carefully spoken. Because the unspoken part wracked her with guilt:

Just in case she disappeared again, and Little Demon needed to be fed.

Cerulia had been attentive to the child's needs; something that Stars was both thankful for, and that made her heart turn over in misery as they'd both stirred at his crying and both made for the crib.

Now, with all three of them awake, the two women had made their way downstairs to care for the child; Stars taking up on the couch to feed him, while Cerulia boiled the kettle in the kitchen.

Little Demon was still suckling when Cerulia returned to the main room with tea. She placed both cups on the floor by the couch, before sitting beside the nurlak woman and watching her closely.

Stars ran a hand through her son's hair as he drank. He was feeding slower than usual, Stars noted, almost like he was full but refusing to let her go.

'Look at that smile,' Cerulia said, her words kind but her voice still flat and monotonous. 'He didn't smile like that when I was feeding him. Not once.'

'Na?' Stars asked. 'He was sad?'

‘He missed you,’ Cerulia told her. ‘It’s clear he loves you.’

‘He loves me,’ Stars echoed, slowly, before her ears folded back miserably. ‘But he doesn’t need me, does he?’

‘What?’ Cerulia asked; her intended infliction unclear as her tone didn’t change and the word came out with no readable emotion.

‘He doesn’t need me,’ Stars repeated. ‘To him, I was gone for ten days. And he’s still alright. He’s healthy. He— I can see he’s gained weight,’ voice trembling, Stars felt tears welling in her eyes. ‘If I never came back, he would have been alright. He would have forgotten me, and—’

‘Shut up.’

Stars did; so shocked by the words —with their flat and emotionless delivery— that she was stunned into silence as she turned to look at Cerulia.

‘You’re tired,’ Cerulia said, simply. ‘You’ve been through a lot. Your judgement is impaired and you’re not thinking straight. Your son needs you.’

‘But he... you were feeding him, and—’

‘So?’ Cerulia’s tone was still flat; though her brow furrowed into a frown of displeasure. ‘Being fed doesn’t mean he doesn’t need you. The poor thing cried the entire time you were gone. When Metita called me in, it took me an hour to get him to latch on. And he hadn’t eaten for half a day, before that. He was hungry, but he wanted you. He loves you.’

Stars’ own brow furrowed, and she looked to the floor. ‘Loving me is different from needing me.’

‘Is it?’ Cerulia asked.

Stars just sighed. ‘I don’t know.’

‘You’re tired,’ Cerulia repeated. ‘Whatever happened to you, it’s affected you deeply. It’s why you’ve lost track of time and—’

‘Na. I didn’t lose track of time,’ Stars interrupted,

firmly. 'It was only a few hours, for me. Rachel put me back in the wrong day. Either by accident, or because I made her mad by not doing what she said.'

'I see,' Cerulia acknowledged, clearly not believing Stars, but not wanting to argue. 'What was it that she wanted you to do?'

'She wanted me to take the fallen star,' Stars commented. 'But I didn't. Not until she told me why.'

'The yellow soulstone,' Cerulia clarified. 'The one that Distro took from you and put away?'

'Yi, Rachel said that the woman inside it knows how to cure a sickness that Little Demon will catch in seven years.'

'I see,' Cerulia repeated. 'And when you didn't take the stone, she got angry at you.'

'She called me stubborn,' Stars said.

'I would believe that,' Cerulia said; her flat tone accompanied by a warm smile. Though it quickly fell to a concerned look as Little Demon unlatched from Stars' breast and hiccuped. 'He looks like he's eaten too much,' she commented. 'He may spit up when you burp him. Let me get a cloth before you do.'

Stars didn't argue as the woman rose to her feet and retrieved her bag from the table. She thought she might have preferred the change of topic, over being treated like she was crazy or a liar.

A cloth was laid over Stars' shoulder, and she picked up her son over the same shoulder and gave him several gentle pats until he burped and —as predicted— spat up some of the milk he had just eaten.

'There we go,' Cerulia commented, folding up the cloth before the sick could dribble down and make a mess.

'You're very mip— Very *good* at looking after berr,' Stars said, still gently rubbing her son's back as he gave a gurgle and began to doze again. 'Uh. Berr is babies. Do you have any?'

‘I have a son,’ she answered. ‘Just one. He’s seven. Turning eight with Keowfe at the end of the month.’

‘Keowfe?’ Stars twitched an ear.

‘Sonfe,’ Cerulia clarified in International. ‘The yearly eclipse.’

‘Oh,’ Stars understood. ‘We called it Dalrenta, in Heck’ne. It was a very scary time, to have all of the Animon gods in one place for so long. But now that I know more about Scara and her family, it’s a lot less scary.’

Cerulia gave a nod, as she rolled up the cloth and put it aside. She picked up their tea, passing one cup to Stars, and they both began to sip at their drinks.

‘Did you know each day of the eclipse has meaning?’ Cerulia asked. ‘Well. If you believe in Scara, anyway.’

‘Na,’ Stars answered. ‘I knew it was the sun’s daughters, making him rest, but I didn’t know each day had meaning.... You said “if” I believe in Scara. People only say that sort of thing in that sort of way, if they’re trying to say they don’t believe in it themselves. Do you not believe in Scara?’

‘I do not,’ Cerulia admitted, and Stars found herself watching the woman’s face carefully as she spoke; trying to understand her expressions to make up for the flat and emotionless tone. ‘I was raised Animon, but I’ve always had doubts.... Doing the job I do it was only a matter of time before I gave up hope that the Goddess had any power. If she exists at all.’

‘A’la’ha?’ Stars twitched her ear curiously, as Cerulia’s face grew sombre and sorrowful. ‘What do you mean? Kekik Distro said you are a wet nurse, and you help feed children. Why would that make you lose your hope?’

‘I’m a wet nurse for the E.D.R,’ Cerulia told her. ‘I feed orphans and children taken from abusive homes. It’s draining.’

‘Is that why you talk that way?’ Stars asked, before immediately remembering that Ka’harja had told her that

sort of thing was very rude to comment on. She covered her mouth and blushed. 'I'm sorry. That was rude.'

'I've always talked this way,' Cerulia said; seemingly not annoyed as she gave a short-lived smile. 'I don't mind if the way you word yourself is a little rude. People say that the way I talk is rude. Even when the things I say are polite.'

'I don't mean to be rude,' Stars promised.

'Nor do I,' Cerulia agreed. 'But people who want to find fault in someone will always find it, in whatever way they can. If it is not your words that are rude, it is your tone. If not your tone, it is that you don't look them in the eye when you speak. And if you look them in the eye, you're looking at them with an attitude. You can do everything correctly and people will still find fault.'

Stars gave a heavy sigh, understanding all too well what Cerulia meant. 'That's how it felt with Lah'kort,' she admitted. 'Sometimes, it was like he came to me looking for a reason to be angry at me. And when he couldn't find one—when I'd been as mip behaved as I could be—it made him even angrier. Which made me scared. Very, very scared.'

A gentle hand brushed Stars' arm, and she gave Cerulia an appreciative smile before sipping up the last of the tea and sighing again.

'If being a wet nurse is so hard, why do you do it?' she asked.

'It needs to be done,' was the simple reply. 'I never stopped producing milk. Even after I weaned my son. This seemed the most logical thing to do with it.'

'Even though it makes you so tired?'

'Yes. Helping others is worth the fatigue.'

Stars looked at her feet for a moment, examining her bare toes quietly as she turned Cerulia's answer over in her mind. Then, she glanced to the woman and asked, 'What's your son's name?'

‘Terik,’ was the answer.

‘He’s very lucky, I think,’ Stars said. ‘To have you for a kekik— That means mother.’

‘Thank you,’ Cerulia offered another smile which, as usual, fell quickly into that almost blank expression Stars was starting to get used to.

Stars thought then that maybe Cerulia’s smile wasn’t falling because she was unhappy with what had been said; but because, like her voice, it was simply the most comfortable way for her face to be.

‘I’m lucky, too,’ Cerulia said. ‘He’s a sweet boy. He takes after his father.’

‘His father?’ Stars echoed.

‘Yes. My husband, he—’ Cerulia cut off, looking like she’d realised she’d said something wrong; though Stars couldn’t figure out what it was as both women folded back their ears and stiffened. After a moment, Cerulia let out a breath. ‘I apologise. I shouldn’t speak about him, not when you’re.... That was inappropriate.’

‘When I’m... what?’ Stars asked.

‘On your own,’ Cerulia said; her voice finally showing some emotion, as she took on an empathetic tone— Or, Stars assumed it was *supposed* to be an empathetic tone. It was hard to tell, as it sounded very stilted and unnatural; like Cerulia had struggled with it.

‘But I’m not on my own?’ Stars said, cocking her head.... And then, what Cerulia had meant clicked, and she reeled back and grimaced. ‘You mean Fabecut.’

‘Yes,’ the natural flatness returned to Cerulia’s voice; though her expression stayed sympathetic. ‘I read your file. I understand he’s not present.’

‘Metita thinks he took advantage of me,’ Stars said, her ears pressing down further. It had been a hard thing to hear, and it was even harder, now, to say out loud herself. It made every part of her feel cold and clammy and tense, as she rested her empty cup on her knee and looked to the

front door. She didn't focus on it, not really; she simply wanted to avoid looking Cerulia in the eye as she swallowed down the tremble in her voice. 'I don't like that thought. It's one of my more mup thoughts. But I'm starting to think it might be true. Because a lot of the things he said were very confusing, and...'

A doleful quiet overtook the room as Stars trailed off, only broken by Little Demon's sleepy mumbles and the hoot of an owl outside.

Cerulia didn't say anything or push Stars to continue her sentence as they sat together. No; the only thing she did was, after several moments of quiet, take Stars' empty cup in the hand opposite her own and stand from the couch to return them to the kitchen.

Stars also stood, as Cerulia did, and by the time the woman was returning from the sink, Stars was sitting on the front steps; door open behind her so her companion could easily join her.

Cerulia let herself down onto the step beside Stars, though she still didn't say anything as they sat together quietly; looking more to the beautiful night sky above than at each other.

Then, finally, Stars lowered her gaze and heaved a loud sigh.

'*Ka'harja could save me,*' she breathed, her voice scarcely a whisper. 'I keep thinking about that. I was a stranger to him. And to Kekik Distro. But they never even hesitated to help me. Not even a little bit. They did everything they could to make sure I was safe. They lost their home because of me. They lost *everything*. And then, even when they didn't have to come after me, when they could have left on their own to go somewhere safe and say I wasn't their problem anymore, they still came to make sure that Lah'kort couldn't take me back. They fought to keep me safe. To make sure I never got hurt again.... And I keep thinking these thoughts, about Sken and Annanyn and

Coborn and Koko and Baku— About how they knew me even less than Ka’harja did. And they had even less reason to help me, because I got in the way, and made them late for their sales, and ate their food, and read their books, and asked them lots of questions. And I think about how they helped me, even before they loved me. And I think... why couldn’t Fabecut do that? He said he loved me. So why couldn’t he do these things, that people who *didn’t* love me could do? And then my thoughts get all jumbled, and I try to think of a reason, but I can’t. I can’t think of a single reason why someone who said they loved me would leave me behind to get hurt, when people who didn’t know me never even had it cross their minds to walk away without me. Instead I keep hearing questions in my mind, and I don’t know how to answer them. How could Fabecut say he loved me, and then leave me to Lah’kort’s anger, when strangers were so willing to stand between us to protect me?’

Cerulia nodded along, attentively, as Stars spoke; waiting for the nurlak to finish before calmly replying, ‘It sounds like he lied to you, doesn’t it?’

‘Yi, I think he did,’ Stars agreed, and as she did she felt both a horrible twisting pain in her chest, and a light weightless feeling. It was a confusing mix of relief and grief that made her throat heavy, like she was about to be sick. ‘I think he... I think he *did* lie about loving me. I don’t like that he lied.’

‘No, I wouldn’t think so,’ Cerulia said, simply. ‘I’m sorry—’

‘Stars? Stars!’

A familiar voice interrupted the women’s conversation, and Stars looked up to see Tenkata, eyes wide and face flushed with worry, hurry past his own front yard to where she sat on the step. He looked exhausted from his long night of work; though it seemed that seeing Stars had given him a powerful jolt of energy that left his

tail bristling and his ears tall and erect.

‘Stars, you’re alright!’ he exclaimed, taking Stars by her free hands and squeezing them tight. ‘We’ve been so worried about you! Where have you been?! We thought something horrible had happened to you— Ketika said you were so shaken after your therapy appointment, and then you just vanished! We thought— Maybe you’d— You’d hurt yourself or... Or.... Oh, I’m so glad you’re alright!’

‘Why would I hurt *myself*?’ Stars twitched an ear. ‘I don’t like being hurt. Why would I make myself hurt? If I wanted to be hurt, I would have stayed in Heck’ne and not come here; it would have been much easier to get hurt there.’

A sound that could have potentially been a laugh escaped Cerulia, though Stars wasn’t completely sure that’s what it was as it was hurriedly muffled.

‘Where have you been?’ Tenkata asked again, his panting breath slowing as he began to compose himself. ‘We thought something had happened to you, Stars.’

‘Something did happen,’ Stars answered, simply, twitching an ear as Tenkata’s worried look became even more worried. ‘I went back in time.’

‘*What?*’ his voice broke in a squeak.

‘I went back in time,’ Stars repeated, simply. ‘Janet and Rachel came in out of the storm. They knew my name, and they opened a portal to five months ago. And I went with them, because they said there was something important for me to do. Then, Rachel put me back in the wrong day. She put me back ten days late. Which was a big surprise, and I think she may have done it on purpose because I made her mad at me.’

Tenkata opened his mouth, then closed it. Then opened it again. Then closed it again. He seemed at a loss for words, as he looked up at Stars with a disbelieving expression.

And Stars clamped her mouth closed, her lips growing

tight and a frown finding its way to her face as she realised, aloud; ‘You think I’m being hakalika.’

‘Uh—’ Tenkata looked to Cerulia, then, with a pleading expression. But the woman only shrugged.

‘I’m not hakalika,’ Stars told him, her voice firm. ‘I know that what I saw was real.’

‘Oh... okay?’ Tenkata clearly didn’t believe Stars, though he didn’t argue as he sat by her side —the opposite side Cerulia sat at— and let out a long, relieved breath. His entire body seemed to deflate as the air escaped him, and he ended the sigh with a chuckle and pet Stars on the arm. ‘I’m glad you’re safe, Stars. Ketika and I have been worried sick.’

‘I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be gone so long,’ said Stars. ‘For me, it was only a few hours....’

She trailed off as Tenkata’s face grew tense and disbelieving, and felt her heart twist as he looked at her with tired eyes.

He didn’t believe her.

It made a thick and heavy lump sit in her throat, as she watched him.

His eyes betrayed every thought in his mind— And it was clear that he thought she was crazy.

‘You don’t believe me,’ she stated.

‘No, no!’ it was an obvious lie, as he pet her arm. ‘I-I believe you.’

‘You don’t,’ she mumbled, almost bitterly, as she pulled her arm from him and looked away. ‘You think I’m hakalika in the head.’

‘No, Stars, I don’t think you’re crazy,’ he said, reaching for her again but pulling back as Cerulia silently swiped at his hand and shook her head at him. ‘Stars. I don’t.’

‘You’re a very bad liar, Tenkata,’ said Stars. ‘I’ve told you before that I’m not stupid. I can tell that you’re not

saying what you mean. I see it in your eyes. And hear it in your voice. You're lying to me.'

Slowly, Tenkata closed his mouth. He let out a sigh through his nose and let his shoulders fall slack in a defeated way.

In response, Stars gave a long and miserable groan before pushing herself to her feet and turning for the door. 'I'm going to go back to sleep,' she decided. 'Kekik Distro says we have to get up early tomorrow to meet Metita, and I don't want to be tired when I talk to him.'

'Oh, okay.... Goodn—' Tenkata was cut off as Stars shut the door behind herself.

Chapter 12:
Yune 16th, Firthda
Year 10,053 AE
**(Metita's Office; Kokako Boaka's E.D.R Centre
of Operations)**

Metita's office was, despite being made to be very warm and inviting, currently a very tense and awkward place to be.

The walls were painted a warm cream-yellow, and the wooden filing cabinets that ran along them neatly were painted with a decorative golden trim that incorporated the letters each drawer was associated with. And the plants that were placed along the shelves were deep green, healthy with the warm weather and sunlight that shone in from the large glass window that overlooked the community garden outside.

But, despite the soft chairs and the stuffed spider toys that sat along the edge of the desk, Stars couldn't help feeling anxious.

She was in trouble, she was sure of it. Even though Metita had greeted her with a relieved look and invited her to sit down with a tired smile, she could see that he was upset. She could hear it in his voice, too, as he excused himself to retrieve two more chairs for Distro and Ka'harja (who had both insisted that poor, exhausted Dena be the one to take the second chair that was already at the desk).

Stars shuffled awkwardly as Metita returned, unable to look him in the eye as he set the two seats down for Ka'harja and his mother and then took his own seat again.

He lifted his coffee to his lips and pulled out a small stack of papers to place on his desk; and Stars saw her name printed at the top. Though she didn't see much else as she heard a knock at the door and Metita called out:

'Come in!'

Cerulia entered the room, then, and set down four cups —one for each Dena, Distro, Ka'harja, and Stars— which she had filled with boiling water and prepackaged teabags.

'Thank you,' Stars mumbled as the cup was shifted in front of her; though she didn't pick it up.

Likewise, Ka'harja didn't seem interested in the tea. Though he still sat beside Stars to run a comforting hand along her back as she nuzzled her son and kissed his nose. Distro and Dena both took their tea, sipping at it politely as they eyed Metita.

Metita, seeing that everyone was finally settled, put down his drink and quickly licked his lips to wet them. 'Stars,' he began, leaning forward in his chair seriously. 'You don't have to look so nervous. You're not in any trouble.'

Stars let out a long, trembling breath; unsure if she truly believed him. She glanced to her mother, and then to Distro. Then she leant against Ka'harja and looked back down at her son as he babbled and reached up to grab at her hair.

'It... *feels* like I'm in trouble,' she admitted.

'I promise you're not,' Metita said, gently. 'We've all been very worried about you. We didn't know where you were or why you left. And with it being so soon after your therapy appointment, there was concern that something that was brought up distressed you.... Though, Dr Kamaras assured me that she didn't think you would have gone far without your son. And I had to agree that it was out of character for you to leave him behind; which only made your absence more concerning, the more time that passed.'

Stars blushed, as Metita spoke, not daring to look up to meet his eye.

'We were worried someone had hurt you,' Metita continued, his voice giving an upset tremble which he quickly swallowed down. The tone he took on, then, was

much like Cerulia's speaking voice; only coming out of Metita it sounded as forced and as unnatural as when Cerulia had tried to sound sympathetic, 'Your safety is very important to us, Stars. As is your son's. We need to know where you've been for the past ten days.'

A tense quiet fell though the room, as all eyes turned to watch Stars.

But Stars didn't speak.

Instead, she remembered how Tenkata had looked at her, when she'd said she'd gone to the past; she didn't want Metita to look at her in that way. He had always been so soft and kind to her, and the thought of him looking at her like she was crazy made her entire body tremble.

And he seemed to see her shaking, as his serious look faltered into one of sympathy and he glanced to Cerulia before reaching out a hand and placing it gently on Stars' own.

'Stars,' Metita's voice was soft again as he addressed her. 'You're not in any trouble. Remember that we're here to help you, not punish you. I may seem withdrawn as we talk on this, but understand that I *have* to be professional. It doesn't mean that I haven't been worried.... Please, tell me where you've been.'

Finally, Stars found the courage to look away from her son, and she met Metita's eyes as her own began to fill with tears. 'Nobody believes me.'

'I do,' Ka'harja reminded her.

She almost thanked him. But before she could, she heard her mother sigh, and looked over to see Dena's brow furrow— Not in anger, but concern and worry.

'I'm not hakalika, Kekik,' Stars said. 'I'm *not*.'

Dena simply turned away without replying; her ears pressing down and her eyes squeezing tight as if she were in pain.

Metita waited patiently, as Stars took in a shaky breath and turned back to him. She felt both Ka'harja and

Distro pet her on the back, and heard the sound of Cerulia's nails tapping anxiously along the edge of Metita's desk.

'She's nervous about it,' Cerulia commented, when Stars didn't speak. 'I think she might be concerned you're going to think poorly of her, if she tells you.'

'Ah,' Metita gave a gentle nod. 'I see. *Is* it something I'm going to think poorly of her, for?'

'No,' Cerulia answered, simply. 'I think you won't believe it. And I think it will concern you. But I don't think it will make you think poorly of her.'

Another nod, and Metita looked back to Stars. 'Stars?'

'I went to the past,' Stars said, causing Dena to give a sob-like squeak that was quickly muffled. 'Janet and Rachel came to the house. They knew my name, and they knew my Little Demon. They said they wanted to help him. They said that he would die, if I didn't go with them.'

Metita's brow raised high. 'They threatened your son?'

'No, they said they wanted to *help* him,' Stars corrected. 'They wanted to save his life, but I had to go with them to save him.'

'That sounds like a threat,' Metita sighed.

'I don't think it was,' said Stars. 'They said they owed me a favour because, in two years, I'm going to save Rachel's life. Even though I don't like her.'

'I see...' Metita's elbows found the table as he leant forward, and he pressed his mouth against his folded hands with a pensive frown. It was clear to Stars, just by the way his eyes flicked over her, that he was considering his next words carefully. 'Did they tell you what to tell us, when you got back?'

'Na,' Stars answered. 'They told me I could say whatever I wanted, when I got back into the right time. I think they knew that nobody was going to believe me.'

Metita looked doubtful, though he didn't argue with

her, and Stars felt her heart sink as he began to scribble down his notes.

She could read some of what he wrote, despite it being upside down. And she didn't like the words he was using:

Apprehensive to explain absence. Seems to have anxiety of receiving a penalty. Alleges to have gone back in time.

'I'm not lying!' Stars blurted. 'You don't believe me. Why doesn't anyone believe me?!'

'I do,' Ka'harja reassured.

It gave Stars little comfort, as everyone else shuffled awkwardly and her mother heaved a sigh.

Metita watched Stars for a long moment, before writing one last note and looking back up to her. 'I don't think you're lying to me,' he told her, gently. 'I trust that you are telling me *exactly* what you believe happened to you; my concern is whether or not something has affected your perception of events. Some magics can affect the memory and—'

'Na! I *did* go back in time!' Stars exclaimed, raising her voice in growing desperation. 'I went back to the night Little Demon was born— The night I met Ka'harja! I saw myself! They couldn't have faked that!'

'Sometimes, magic can affect our perception and our memories,' Metita continued; keeping his tone soft and cool. 'If you were drugged or enchanted—'

'I WASN'T!' Stars rose from her seat; the tears finally escaping her. 'I wasn't! I wasn't!'

Metita's eyes went wide. 'Stars—'

'I'm not lying! I'm not hakalika! I saw what I saw, and what I saw was real! Why won't anyone *believe* me?!'

'Stars, lower your voice,' Cerulia commented, stepping to the nurlak's side and motioning for her to quiet down. 'You're frightening Demon. Shh, now....'

Stars clamped her mouth shut, sniffing a loud, wet

sob in through her nose as she dropped back heavily into her chair and buried her face into her murmuring son. 'Why won't anyone believe me?'

'I do,' Ka'harja said again. Then he turned to Metita, and spoke with a firmness in his voice that Stars knew was rare, 'I saw it myself. I was there when she came home; the bathroom door opened, and on the other side was Okatako. I'd recognise it anywhere— And it wasn't Sunwatch. I know what Sunwatch in Okatako looks like. It was the end of Snowfall. I could tell by the colour of the grass. At *this* time of year the grass in Okatako is deep green and thicker. But it wasn't thick and green. It was Snowfall grass; it was duller, with a blue-grey hue to it. You might not believe what *she* saw. But I believe what *I* saw. And I saw Okatako at the wrong time of year.'

Ka'harja's hand closed around Stars' own and he took a deep, defiant breath... though Stars could feel his hand twitch, and knew he was resisting the urge to turn and flee out of the room. So she squeezed his hand, giving him a grateful look as she sniffled and wiped her eyes with the back of her last free hand.

Metita simply nodded, looking unsure how, exactly, to respond to what he had been told. He made a note on his page, that Stars didn't get the chance to see, as Distro gave a loud and haughty sniff and put her feet up on the desk.

'Distro, please don't do that—'

'I believe her, too,' Distro decided aloud.

Dena gave a short gasp. 'Don't encourage her!'

'I'm *not* encouraging her,' Distro responded, firmly. 'I believe her. And you better think hard about why you *don't* believe her, because as far as I'm concerned, it's the scenario that makes the most sense.'

'The *most* sense?!' Dena rose to her feet, all but hissing at Distro as she faced the woman and threw up her hands. 'How does this make *any* sense at all?! It's completely unbelievable!'

Distro motioned to her face with a hand, running a finger along the scales that trailed her snout until it rested on one of her overgrown, tusk-like teeth. ‘Unbelievable things have happened to our family before. Besides—’ she took her feet from the desk and stood to face Dena... though, unlike the nurlak, Distro kept her temper even as she crossed her arms and continued, ‘We know it’s not just Stars seeing things, because Ka’harja saw it, too. Think critically, for a moment. She wasn’t hallucinating; she really *did* go somewhere. Hear that. What she saw was *not* just in her head. Someone else saw it. She is *not* crazy. So I want to ask you, seriously, Dena, why you think anyone would *fake* something like this? What would the *point* be? Tell me — What makes more sense to you? A pair of total strangers breaking into our house, kidnapping Stars for no apparent reason, faking going back in time, and then holding her hostage for ten days before popping her back into the bathroom? Not hurting her. Not taking anything from her or making her *do* anything— Just confusing her for no reason, giving her a big rock to hold, and then throwing her back home. Does that seriously make more sense to you than the idea that someone owed her a favour and used magic we don’t understand to pay it back?’

All four of Dena’s hands clenched into tight fists and her jaw trembled as she glared Distro down with a vicious look that made the room fall into silence. Nobody dared to breathe, as the two women met eyes.

Stars swallowed, watching that furious look in her mother’s eye.... The way her ears pinned back, and the way her brow furrowed, and the way her lip twitched. She had never seen her mother so angry. Never before. Not at anyone. Not even at Lah’kort.

But then, as quickly as it had taken her over, all of the anger was gone from her and she fell forward into Distro’s arms.

Dena let out a short, shaking breath that was more

sob than exhale as Distro embraced her tightly, and she buried her face into the cloth of the woman's scarf.

'I thought she was dead!' Dena whispered through her tears. 'I couldn't bear to lose her. I couldn't! I couldn't! She's all I have left!'

'I know,' Distro comforted, her tone soft and forgiving. 'I know.'

A quiet tapping caught Stars' ear and she side-eyed Metita as he drummed his fingers against his paperwork. There was an air of severity around him, as he looked to the family and motioned to Cerulia to come close. He whispered to her for a moment — mention of taking Dena to the break room for some water, and something about Little Demon that Stars didn't catch— before they both gave curt hums of affirmation and nodded.

Cerulia took to Distro and Dena's side, gently putting an arm around the pair and leading them out of the room.

The door closed behind them with a quiet *click* and Stars found herself sitting alone with Ka'harja, Metita, and her son.

'Right,' Metita said with a long, tired breath. 'That was very tense, wasn't it? Are you both alright?'

Ka'harja nodded, though Stars wasn't sure.... *Was she alright? She didn't feel alright.* But, then, she wasn't hurt. And she'd seen arguments like that so many times in Heck'ne; arguments *worse* than that, so many times! Why was this one so much different? Why did it make her heart pound so hard?

'What about Little Demon?' Metita asked, his voice cutting through Stars' confused thoughts. 'He seems distressed.'

Stars' attention turned to the child in her arms, and she began to bounce him as he gave a wary babble.

'Oh, don't be lenta, my little berr,' she whispered to him. *'It's okay. You're not miita. It's okay...'*

Little Demon gave a low, quiet murmur, and reached

up a hand to Stars' cheek; grabbing along one of the long wet streaks that her tears had left on her skin.

'Aw, my mip little katka, *I'm* okay,' Stars reassured, sniffing back the very last of her tears and pecking a kiss on her son's nose. 'I'm okay.'

Metita waited patiently as she calmed her son, before addressing her again.

'I'm sorry, Stars,' he began. 'I'm sorry that I find what happened to you so hard to believe. I know you wouldn't lie to me about it. And I can't even begin to imagine how stressful this entire situation must be for you.... I think that we can all agree; regardless of who believes what did—or didn't— happen, you need time to recover and reorient yourself.'

Stars swallowed, averting her gaze. 'It *did* happen,' she mumbled. 'It really did....'

'I'm not going to argue it didn't,' Metita promised. 'Whether or not I believe it doesn't matter. Not really. What *does* matter right now is you, and how we can help you. Yes?'

Stars watched from the corner of her eye as Ka'harja nodded along, but she didn't answer. Instead, she bounced her baby on her knee and kissed his nose, shrinking into herself as Metita leant forward.

'Stars?'

'Thank you for not trying to tell me I'm wrong,' she finally spoke, her ears drooping in exhaustion. 'It's made me feel very mup, having people trying to tell me I didn't see what I saw.'

'Well, if I can speak on a personal level, instead of professional?' he paused to let Stars nod. 'The way I see it is, even if your memories *have* been modified with magic, or you *were* lied to, *you* believe it. And that's going to affect you. Even if it's not a part of *my* reality, it's a part of *your* reality. And me believing you or not believing you isn't going to stop the way you experienced things from affecting

you the way they have. I can see that people arguing about it is only causing you more distress; so I won't argue. Even if I don't believe that going back in time is possible, I don't feel it's my place to tell you what you saw, or that the way you perceived your experience of it was wrong.'

Stars swallowed, looking back to her son as she did, and felt as Ka'harja shifted closer and held her hand tighter.

A long breath escaped her before she pursed her lips tight and let her mind try and unravel the confusing thoughts in her head.

She supposed what Metita said was... right, wasn't it? It *didn't* matter what anyone else believed— *She* knew what she had been through. *She* knew she had gone back in time. And *she* knew she was right. And... if nobody was going to listen to what she said or believe her, she supposed it would be easier to simply not talk about it.

There was nothing that could be done, after all; *she* knew where she'd gone and what she'd been through. But, when she thought about it, what could possibly come from arguing to convince anyone else of it? She was back in the present, now. And she had things to do! Her son needed her, as Cerulia had made clear to her the night before and that morning during breakfast; Little Demon needed *her*. Her, above anyone else. And she needed to look after him; not waste her time and energy fighting with people who didn't want to believe what she'd seen.

After all, arguing about where she had or hadn't been wouldn't change what had already happened to her. Those who wouldn't believe her would just think she was crazy or lying. And those that *did* believe her... what could they do about it? What would she *want* them to do about it?

The whole situation was too confusing, and she simply couldn't dwell on it when her son needed her with him.

'Metita?' Stars twitched an ear, feeling a lump forming in her throat as she couldn't seem to find the strength to look up at him.

‘Yes, Stars?’

‘If people ask me where I’ve been...’ she paused, chewing her lip for a moment as she tried to gather her nerves. ‘Is it alright if I lie?’

Both Metita and Ka’harja looked confused. They cast each other an unsure glance before both turning back to Stars again.

‘Lie?’ Metita echoed.

‘Yi,’ Stars confirmed. ‘I think I would rather say I don’t remember, than have people think I’m hakalika.’

‘Ah,’ Metita’s shoulders went slack, as he watched her, and he gave a gentle nod. ‘I understand. Yes. You can tell people you don’t remember, if it makes it easier for you. I’ll make a note in your file that it’s something you don’t want to speak on. That way nobody else from the E.D.R should ask about it. I do recommend you tell Dr Kamaras the truth, however, so they can understand what you’ve been through and provide you with the help you need. You understand?’

‘Yi,’ Stars confirmed, letting out a breath and feeling like a weight had been lifted off her shoulders. ‘I do. Thank you.’

Ka’harja’s arm wrapped tightly around Stars’ shoulders and he gave her a firm squeeze.

A moment of quiet passed, where nobody spoke, before Metita cleared his throat and pulled a loose document to sit in front of him. ‘Now. Stars,’ he cleared his throat again. ‘I would like to talk about Cerulia.’

‘Cerulia?’ Stars flicked an ear. ‘Why do you want to talk about her?’

‘How do you feel about her?’

Stars cocked her head, unsure why Metita would ask her that. Was Cerulia in some sort of trouble?

‘I think she’s nice,’ Stars answered, cautiously. ‘She’s been very kind to me. And to my Little Demon.’

‘I’m glad to hear that,’ Metita’s lips turned to a warm smile, and he continued to scribble in his paper. ‘Some people find her abrasive— Rude. Because of the way she speaks.’

‘Oh! No, she’s not been rude at all!’ Stars confirmed. ‘She’s been very nice and very patient with me. I like her!’

‘Good, good,’ Metita hummed an affirmative, before stopping his writing and gently crossing his hands. ‘Would you be comfortable if I kept her assigned to your son, just for a little bit longer?’

Stars twitched a curious ear.

‘You’ve been through a lot, and I feel like having a another set of hands might help ease some of the burden,’ he explained. ‘From what I understand, you’ve had to take your son with you everywhere; to your appointments at the library, to your therapist, on your night walks.... I know you’ve had your neighbours offer to watch him for you, but they can only care for him for so long before he needs to be fed, and having to be on-call for that at all times must feel very restricting.’

‘I don’t feel restricted by my Little Demon,’ corrected Stars. ‘I *like* taking him with me! He’s the most precious and mip thing in my whole life!’

‘That’s wonderful,’ Metita’s smile grew. ‘Of course you don’t ever *have* to leave him with Cerulia. But I would like you to have the *option* to do so. At least for a while. I was thinking of having her work mornings with you. Sunrise to noon. Would you be comfortable with that?’

Stars looked to Ka’harja, unsurely, before leaning in close. He leant in to meet her, turning an ear to her so she could whisper into it.

‘*What’s noon?*’ she asked; her gaze flicking to Metita as his chuckle turned to a cough.

‘Midday,’ Ka’harja answered. ‘When the sun meets the centre of the sky.’

‘*Oh!*’ Stars’ ears stood up tall. ‘That makes sense! Is

that why afternoon is called *after* noon?’

‘Yeah, cos it’s after noon,’ Ka’harja snickered.

Metita gave another chuckle-turned cough, and Stars turned back to him.

‘I don’t mind if Cerulia helps look after Little Demon in the morning,’ she said. ‘I’m usually very tired in the morning, because I have trouble sleeping at night. If she came in the morning, I could sleep a little bit longer, couldn’t I? Because she would feed him while I was asleep?’

‘Yes, exactly,’ Metita responded, giving her a happy nod. ‘That’s *exactly* what she would be there for; giving you more time to relax and have breaks, however you choose to take them.... Should I confirm you want her assistance?’

‘Yi, thank you!’

End of Preview.

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