

Chapter 1:

Glif 5th, Minda

Year 10,053 AE

(The Nigelle Farmhouse; Okatoko)

It was late afternoon and Ka'harja's arms were aching from the weight of the wood he'd collected. He knew he should have put it down on the pile outside, but he was too excited! He didn't want to waste time detouring to the woodpile and so instead he pushed open the farmhouse door with his hip and slipped inside.

He almost caught his tail in the hinge and took in a long, hissing breath as he tried to stop the door from slamming shut; the wood he'd collected scattered across the floor as he let it go on one side, and he groaned. He always seemed to forget the kitchen door was spring loaded. He should have used the main door. Or he should have taken the five seconds to put the wood down like he'd kept telling himself on the walk home.

'Oh well, too late now,' he muttered, dumping the rest of the wood on the floor.

'Ka'harja?' his mother's tired, raspy voice called from the main room, and his ears shot up. 'Ka, Sweetheart? Is that you?'

'Yeah! Handsome boy's home!' he responded loudly. 'I got more firewood! I figured we needed more after the bonfire!'

He contemplated the night before for a moment, before realising his mother hadn't responded.

'Mum?' he called again, only to be met with silence.

He sighed, and stepped over the empty bottles that were scattered across the floor. The house was always a mess; he'd given up cleaning it when his mother had refused to give up her drinking. If she wasn't going to try, why should he bother?

'Mum!' he called again, making his way to the main room. 'Mum you're not going to — Oh Great Star, what have you done to yourself this time?!'

She was stuck mid-air with her feet on the table and one hand on the wall behind her— The other clasp her drink as if *it* were the thing stopping her from falling. Her chair was turned up dangerously underneath her. Or, most of it was. One of its legs was a little ways to the side, snapped in half.

It was very obvious what she had done, and she didn't *really* need to say it, but when she did Ka'harja let out a snort.

'I leant too far back,' she muttered, her croaky voice echoing in her own throat.

'You need a hand?' Ka'harja asked, chuckling.

She shook her head and took a drink from the bottle. 'I'm fine. Just a bit of a headache is all.'

'That's a load of crock!' laughed Ka'harja. He made his way to his mother and scooped her into his arms.

For a moment he cradled her, then he placed her in another seat and pulled his own to the table so he could sit beside her.

'How long were you like that?' he asked.

'Too long,' she sighed, flexing her arms. 'I can't feel shit.'

'Being drunk doesn't help,' Ka'harja pointed out with a sigh. 'You really need to cut back before you drown.'

'Distro Nigelle doesn't get drunk!' his mother snorted in such an exaggerated manner that strands of her oily black hair stuck to her lip; she licked them away awkwardly and scowled. 'What do you take me for? Some sort of mustenel lightweight? I'm a foxen! I'm a fucking beer barrel with legs!'

Ka'harja laughed so loudly he hurt his own ears. 'That's a good one! Put the drink down.'

'No!' Distro mumbled childishly and took another swig from her bottle. 'I'm not drunk! Besides, I lost the lid. I can't let it go to waste!'

'Alright,' he shrugged, then leant forward and gripped the bottom of the bottle tightly.

Ka'harja and his mother glared at each other for a long moment before he gave a tug— It should have been easy to get the bottle off her, being twice her size, but Ka'harja struggled to get a grip on the smooth glass as he and his mother played what was easily the most stubborn game of tug-of-war he'd ever experienced.

Finally he liberated the drink and threw his head back victoriously; downing what was left of the alcohol in one go and slamming the bottle onto the table. 'THERE! It didn't go to waste.'

'Fuck!' Distro snapped, grabbing the bottle and launching it across the room in a tantrum. 'FUCK!'

There was a crash as the bottle sailed through one of the back windows, and Ka'harja flinched as the glass fell from the frame. 'Mum!'

For a moment she hesitated; turning over what she had done in her mind for a long while. Then she groaned in frustration and smacked her head into the table.

'Stop it!' Ka'harja exclaimed, grabbing his mother and pulling her upright.

Distro pulled away from her son and then gasped, her eyes going wide. 'Ka'harja, your arms! What happened?!'

'Splinters,' Ka'harja sighed, turning over his arms to examine the flecks of blood in his dark skin. 'From the firewood?'

Distro shook her head and stumbled out of her chair and towards the kitchen. 'Ointment.'

'Aw, Mum! I don't need ointment!' Ka'harja called after her.

There was a crash and he leapt to his feet; meeting his mother as she came out of the pantry with a large jar of disinfectant.

'Come here,' she muttered as she grabbed his wrist and smeared the thick salve onto his skin.

Ka'harja was hit with the smell of garlic and groaned. 'I'm not going to get an infection—'

'Because of *me!*' interrupted Distro, grinning proudly. 'Wait five minutes, Sweetheart. Then wash it off before it burns.'

Ka'harja rolled his eyes as Distro retreated back into the pantry. He licked a glob of the salve off his arm and followed his mother into the room; ducking under the low doorway and glancing around at the herbs.

It was *supposed* to be a pantry. And they did *call* it a pantry.... But they never used it to store food. Instead, they used it for the magical science of alchemy.

Ka'harja rolled his eyes as he thought about it, and glanced around the room. He knew the contents of each jar by sight, now. It had taken him years to— *By the Eighth child of the Ninth!*

'Mum!' Ka'harja snapped, pulling the black-coated jar off the shelf. 'I told you! I told you last week to throw out the mandrake leaves! Look at it! It's growing death-mould! If you leave it any longer it'll grow legs and walk out on its own!'

'Death-mould?' Distro sniffed as she slipped the antiseptic salve back onto its shelf. 'Well, that can be useful.'

'No, it can't!' Ka'harja exclaimed. 'It's called *death*-mould for a reason! What would you make with it?'

'Kraken deterrent!' Distro snapped back, swiping the jar from her son and sticking it back on the shelf. 'Death-mould is a key ingredient!'

'Mum,' Ka'harja's voice was flat.

'What?'

'Krakens? Here?' he motioned around the room. 'In Okatako?'

'It's more likely than you think,' replied Distro. 'The year before you showed up I chased off a kelpie that was trying to steal my clothes from the line! I beat it back with a broom, all the way to the river! I had to dose the bank with anti-kelpie spray for almost a month before it finally moved on!'

'You're making that up!' Ka'harja snorted a laugh.

'Oh yeah? And what part of that story is so unbelievable to you?' Distro huffed.

'You never do the laundry,' chuckling, Ka'harja pointed to his mother's stained clothes. 'When was the last time you washed your shirt?'

'*Yesterday!*' Distro retorted. Her voice broke and she gave a small cough to clear her throat. 'I did the washing yesterday.'

'Bullshit! You've been wearing that since Tain!'

Distro hesitated; her tail giving a confused twitch. 'It's still Tain, isn't it?'

'Great Star, Mum, it's Glif!' Ka'harja exclaimed. 'It's been a month!'

'It has not!' Distro snapped. Then she frowned. 'Really? Ugh. Whoops. I'll go get changed.'

'*Thank you!*' Ka'harja rolled his eyes and followed his mother out of the room. He stopped in the kitchen to wash the ointment off his arms before heading back to the main room.

He watched his mother fish through a pile of clothes for a clean shirt before making her way back to the table.

'I have some good news,' Ka'harja told her as she sat down. 'The caravan's come early. I think they're trying to avoid us by coming now— But it's not that easy to stop the Nigelles! When we want something, we take it!'

For a minute, Distro stared at him. Then she snorted, 'Alright, show me the map.'

All too happy to oblige, Ka'harja shoved a bit of everything off the table until he'd cleared the centre— Revealing the map of the area carved into the wood. He didn't stop to think how strange others may have found it that his mother had, in lieu of paper,

taken the handle of a fork to the dining table to teach him the layout of his home.

He pointed to one of the scratches and motioned along it. 'This is the way they were heading. They had an extra caravan. I think they're carrying more than usual.... We should fix that for them.'

Slowly, Distro nodded. 'I don't know if I'm up for it tonight, Sweetheart. What about in the morning?'

'They'll be gone by morning,' Ka'harja told her. 'It'd be better to go tonight.... Though, maybe you should stay here. I can do it on my own.'

'No you can't. You'll get yourself caught,' she shook her head. 'If something happened to you where would that leave me? No. You won't do it. I forbid it!'

'You know forbidding me from doing things just makes me want to do them more!' Ka'harja cackled. 'I'm going to do it. Do we have any invisibility potions left?'

'Yes, but I'm not telling you where!' Distro scoffed. 'You're not going, and that's final!'

'Fine,' grinning, Ka'harja put his hands on his hips and pressed his ears back cheekily. 'I'll make some myself.'

'You'll do no such thing!' Distro nearly fell out of her seat. Her voice creaked like a rusty door as she coughed in surprise. 'Modification potions are dangerous! You'll poison yourself! Or turn yourself inside out! Or you'll make your tail green again!'

'I've watched you make it hundreds of times before,' Ka'harja argued, dismissing his mother with a flick of his (thankfully again-golden) tail. 'I've memorised the ingredients and measurements. It won't be hard for me to make.'

'Yes it will,' Distro retorted. 'It'll be very difficult. So don't you dare!'

'I'm going to make it,' Ka'harja told her. 'And *that's* final!'

'You're a shame to Welten,' Distro grumbled, motioning behind herself with a flick of her head. 'If him and his siblings actually existed they'd descend from the sky and beat the shit out of you.'

Ka'harja gave an amused scoff and looked up to what his mother had motioned at. It was the badly-made tapestry of the Eight Star that he'd sewn as a kid, back when she'd been teaching him the basics of alchemy.

'Why did you even teach me about the gods if you don't believe in them?' he asked with a laugh.

'We've been over this before,' scoffed Distro, turning to the tapestry. Her voice softened as she stared at the crudely-sewn star. 'Just because I don't believe in something doesn't mean you can't. I wanted to give you that option.'

Ka'harja opened his mouth to argue— But then he looked back at the tapestry and just shook his head.

He remembered that they'd made it together as a not-so-surprising surprise present; he'd wanted to give Distro something special, but hadn't known how to sew. So she'd had to help him make it.

Ka'harja remembered sewing the little crystal sequins into each section of the star. He also remembered getting the colours backwards and accidentally using sapphire for the alchemy point instead of orange carnelian. It was fixed now, but it had taken him over a week just to pick off the mis-coloured sequins—

‘Ka’harja! Finally, you’re back on Demrefor,’ Distro chuckled— Or more, crackled. Her voice was barely audible as she laughed. ‘You zoned out. You alright, Sweetheart?’

Ka’harja glanced to his mother, who stuck out her tongue. It took him a second to realise he was smiling.

‘I was just thinking about when we made that tapestry,’ he said, failing to make his face serious. ‘I’m pretty sure I still have the dagger you gave me that week. I should fix the hilt sometime.’

Distro’s ears pricked up. ‘You still have that old thing? I thought you lost it years ago.’

‘Well, I sort of have,’ he chuckled. ‘But only pretty recently. I know it’s in the house. Somewhere. Hey! I’m due for another “I love you” gift! Maybe you can get me a shovel so I can find the dagger.’

Distro shook her head and laughed. ‘You little wretch! Come on, it’s past your bedtime.’

‘I’m *eighteen*,’ argued Ka’harja.

‘And I’m your mother,’ Distro said firmly. ‘So you’re going to go to bed when I tell you to!’

‘Yeah, well I’m bigger than you,’ Ka’harja retorted, lunging forward and grabbing his mother in a tight hug. He lifted her off her chair and swung her around. ‘And *I* say that it’s past *your* bedtime! So *you* go to sleep while *I* start work on that invisibility potion!’

‘You little shit!’ Distro laughed as Ka’harja threw her onto the bed and tucked her so tightly under the covers she could barely move. ‘That’s it, you’re grounded. Not allowed out of the house for a week!’

‘You know that just makes me want to leave the house more!’ Ka’harja called over his shoulder as he hurried into the kitchen.

‘Get me a drink!’ Distro called. ‘And don’t you dare sass me like you did last time! You know I mean something alcoholic!’

‘Fine!’ Ka’harja replied, veering away from the pantry to a low cupboard. He opened the door as much as its rusty hinge would allow and pulled out a sealed bottle.

Seces’ Seaweed Saviour was written in large letters, joined by a stylised illustration of a dark secas silhouette dangling a large clump of seaweed over their mouth. The secas’ sharp, triangle features made the bottle seem even more foreign to Ka’harja. It was nothing like the soft illustrations of apples and lizards found on foxen drinks, and Ka’harja almost wondered if the secas were compensating for their low alcohol content by making their labels more interesting than the actual drinks.

Though, he was surprised there was any Seaweed Saviour left. It had been half a year since they’d stolen the crate of it; if his mother hadn’t finished it off it *must* be shit.

Can’t be terrible though, Ka’harja thought with a heavy sigh. *Seces seem to love it, so....*

He twisted off the lid, breaking the wax seal, and gave it a sniff.

It smelt like dragon’s piss in a bottle. But he drank a mouthful of it anyway— And was instantly filled with regret. And vomit. He was going to throw up!

He stuck his head out the kitchen window and spat the horrible drink into the

grass. It tasted so much *worse* than dragon piss! There was no way he could give this to his mother. He opted to pour it out the window instead, and found himself wiping his mouth on his arm as he put the empty bottle on the kitchen counter.

‘Fucking disgusting,’ he grumbled, crouching down to retrieve another drink. ‘Barely alcohol. If I ever meet a seces, I’m going to give them a piece of my mind...!’

Then his hand clasp something that... didn’t feel like a bottle. It was warm and squishy. He pulled it out and found himself staring at a tiny, shrivelled face dotted with horns and warts, and let out a squeal of shock.

He threw the little creature as he did, and it scuttled across the floor to a rat-sized hole in the wall. It stopped for a moment to turn and hiss before retreating into the wall and loudly scuttling along the inside beam towards the roof.

Ka’harja wanted to throw up again. He leapt to the sink and washed his hands several times before calling out to his mother, ‘Mum! Imps in the kitchen again! We need to get more pellets!’

Distro let out an angry wail. ‘We just got rid of the fairies!’

‘What do you expect with this mess?’ Ka’harja retorted, deliberately making his sigh loud enough for his mother to hear. ‘I keep telling you; we need to move the compost further from the house! It’s attracting them.’

Distro simply let out another frustrated wail, which sounded more crackled than the last, and fell silent.

Rolling his eyes, Ka’harja sighed and crouched down to check the damage to the cupboard. He forced the door open with a loud metal *scree* and took out the few remaining drinks, then peered into a dark hole that gaped in the back of the recess.

Another little face appeared and Ka’harja instinctively slammed the cupboard shut.

He shivered a little, then smoothed his tail and ears flat with his hands and told himself that the problem was solved; he just needed to remember to never open the cupboard again.

It was theirs, now.

He grabbed a bottle from the floor and clambered to his feet; cracking open the lid and taking a sip of the drink. He gagged when he discovered it was another bottle of Seaweed Saviour, which received the same treatment as the last.

He was more cautious of the next bottle and actually read the label.

The Emperor’s Orgasm.

Nodding in approval, Ka’harja felt his mouth start to water at the thought of the sour apples and bitter luckroot.... And the best ingredient? The juicy run-off from pan-fried spiders? He knew exactly why it was called *The Orgasm*.... But not tonight.

He groaned and put the bottle on the kitchen bench. He couldn’t incapacitate himself before trying to make potions. And his mother was already drunk; she needed something more mild.

Instead he searched through the bottles and picked an unaged wolverine wine called *Melberry*. Or, it was supposed to be unaged. He wasn’t sure how long they’d had it with the layer of dust over the top.

He wiped it clean and took a sip. It was alright. It was no Orgasm, but *much* better than the Seaweed Saviour. And it’s flavour wasn’t too weak— Oh! He had an idea!

He raced into the alchemy room, quickly emptying a small phial of sparkly green goo into the bottle of alcohol, which he took out to his mother. She was still trapped tightly under the covers, so Ka'harja teased her with it for a while before finally freeing her and watching as she drank the entire bottle in one go.

'Remind me again why we don't chuck the empty bottles?' Ka'harja asked as Distro put the empty bottle beside the bed.

She couldn't respond until she'd finished burping. 'You know I use them for my alchemy. It's cheaper this way.'

'Maybe, but do we really need *this many* empty bottles? I can barely walk five steps without—'

'It's either this, or an extra hundred gold a month for clear phials,' Distro interrupted. 'And you know Denni's terrible at picking up our orders! She'd forget half the stock and we'd be stuck with *nothing!* No, no. This works fine for me!'

'Crock!' Ka'harja barked a laugh and nudged his mother. 'But, now that I've got you in a good mood, how about we make that invisibility potion and raid the caravans for all they've got?'

'Fuck no!' Distro exclaimed, jumping on the head of the bed so she was as tall as her son. 'You're forbidden!'

'And that's why I spiked your drink,' Ka'harja grinned. 'Night night!'

'*What?*' Distro's eyes widened. Then she collapsed sideways onto the bed and let out a loud snore.

'You can yell at me tomorrow,' Ka'harja chuckled, moving her to a more comfortable position and covering her with the blanket. 'If you remember to.'

Chapter End.

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