

Chapter 13: Glif 7th, Yieda Year 10,053 AE (The Nigelle Farm Ruins; Okatako)

Ka'harja wasn't sure when he'd fallen asleep. He'd woken up in a sitting position with a blanket thrown around his shoulders and an unopened bottle of White Dragon Wine at his feet. His back was sore from the awkward way he'd slept and he felt his muscles complain every time he bent down to sort through the burnt remains of his house.

He looked at the remaining walls of the building and sighed; it was like losing a part of his family. He didn't want to believe it had happened but everywhere he looked he saw the grim reality that used to be his home. It wasn't long before he felt himself starting to tremble and, trying to keep himself calm, he took a deep breath and tried to think of the positives.

He had friends now, he supposed. People he actually sort of liked. And they were helping him and Distro salvage anything and everything they could.

Ka'harja grumbled and tugged off the cloth from his mouth; he couldn't breathe with it on and his chest was starting to ache. Coff had been worried about the ash and soot getting into everyone's lungs, and being a healer he was probably right— But Ka'harja couldn't bear wearing it any longer.

The stone bathroom had barely been touched by the flames, though the smoke had ruined most of the cloth and towels on the shelves. Ka'harja wondered if they could wash them or if it'd be better to leave them behind.

His question was answered by Distro gathering up an armful of cloth and making her way to the caravan that stood off to the side. He grabbed an armful of things himself and followed his mother.

The floor of the caravan was covered in things saved from the house. Slightly warped pots and pans were piled against the back of the caravan, while a few singed-but-okay metal boxes had been pulled out of the ashes.

As he put his armful of cloth down he recognised the enchanted sack. It was completely untouched by the flames, despite the fact it had been in the main room where the worst of the blaze was, and Ka'harja turned to his mother with a questioning look.

'Fireproof charms were ten percent off,' she mumbled. 'And I was already getting the invisibility enchantment put on.'

Ka'harja laughed. He felt guilty about taking the things, but he was happy to know that none of it was damaged. Perhaps he could sneak it back into Coff's caravan when everyone else was busy.

'Hey, don't laugh, I saved twenty gold on that enchantment—'

'WHAT?' Ka'harja knew that a fireproof charm wasn't worth *fifty* gold— And that Distro must have paid at least three times that much for a ten percent saving to be *twenty* gold. He quickly tried to calculate it in his head and nearly slapped his mother when he figured it out. 'You paid *two hundred gold* for a fireproofing enchantment?'

'No, I paid one hundred and eighty!' Distro snapped. 'You're forgetting that I saved twenty!'

'Saving twenty gold on a fireproofing charm should mean you get it for *free*!' he retorted. 'You could have gotten a cheaper one somewhere else—'

'And have the enchantment wear off after a week? No thank you!' Distro snapped back. 'Lifetime guarantees don't come from cheap enchanters!'

'*Lifetime guarantees don't come from cheap enchanters,*' Ka'harja mocked. 'Great Star, Mum, no wonder we're always broke!'

'You mean: no wonder we always have things that work properly!' Distro put her hands on her hips and shook her head. 'Imagine if I used cheap ingredients for the potions? They'd not be half as good!'

Ka'harja just laughed and walked back to the ashes of his house.

'Don't you walk away from me!' Distro called out, following her son. She nearly ran into Baku as he came out of the pantry. 'You! Baku, was it? Tell Ka'harja for me— Tell him that it's better to pay more for something that works, than pay less and have to replace it later!'

Baku looked stunned. 'I— Ah— Wha— Huh?'

'She paid two hundred gold for a fireproof enchantment on a canvas sack,' Ka'harja explained.

'*How much?*' Koko's voice called from behind the burnt wall and she poked her head out of the pantry. 'Scara in the High-World, who pays that much for an enchantment that'll wear off in a month's time?'

'*Well,* I've had the enchantment on it for five years, and it hasn't worn off!' Distro huffed. 'And if I was paying ten gold every month for five years, I would have paid... uh... a *lot* more than two hundred by now!'

Baku shot Koko a look, as if asking her to say something, but Koko just shrugged before retreating back into the room.

'The stuff in here's not too bad,' she called. 'It's mostly smoke damage! Everything that's sealed should be fine!'

'Let me sort through it all. I know what I'm doing,' Ka'harja chuckled, though it sounded sadder than he meant it to. It was silly but he hated the idea of anyone else being in the pantry right now. He wanted to go through the remains of his childhood on his own. Take in each herb and its smell, slowly, while sitting in the corner of the burnt-up room behind the alchemy table where he could pretend he was just relaxing with a bottle of drink while practising his craft.

He knew he couldn't actually sit and smell each herb, though. Not with the caravaners hanging around. So he settled for checking through the glass which ingredients were salvageable and passing them out to his mother, who took them to the caravan and chucked them in the back with little care.

'That's all the ingredients,' said Ka'harja as he bent under the low door where his mother was anxiously waiting. 'Are you alright, Mum?'

'The table,' she blurted. 'Is it alright?'

Ka'harja nodded dumbly and Distro let out a tense breath.

'Oh, praise the Great Star,' she mumbled. 'That was a gift from my father.'

‘Everything’s a gift from your father!’ Ka’harja laughed. ‘But, no, it’s fine. We’re going to need a few people to lift it, though.’

Distro glanced around. ‘You!’ she exclaimed when she saw Felelor. ‘Come here!’

Ka’harja put his face in his hand as Felelor stared at his mother and asked, ‘Why?’

‘Don’t talk back to me! Get over here, *now!*’ Distro snapped in such a motherly tone Felelor jumped and rushed over without further question.

He was quickly joined by Trat and Naranako, who’d heard Distro’s voice from around the wall and instinctively followed. They looked doubly as confused and almost three times as guilty as Felelor, and Ka’harja almost laughed until his mother ordered him out of the way.

‘Goddess in the High-World!’ Koko laughed as she rounded the corner. ‘Did it just get more foxen around here, or was it just me? I haven’t heard a woman snap like that since I told my parents I was moving out!’

Distro laughed, which turned into a cough.

‘Baku! Lif!’ Koko snapped in the same tone Distro had used. She waited a moment as the poor men skidded around the corner before pointing to Distro. ‘Do *exactly* as she says.’

‘Yes ma’am,’ Lif said obediently, nodding.

When Baku didn’t nod, Koko gave him a shove. ‘I mean it, Baku!’

‘I know,’ Baku smiled, motioning at one of the bruises from their fight the other night. ‘You rarely don’t.’

‘We need to move the alchemy table,’ Distro said simply. ‘I won’t leave without it.’

‘Of course,’ Felelor sighed. ‘You can’t just get a new one?’

‘My father gave that to me!’ Distro snapped back.

‘Yeah,’ Ka’harja said playfully. ‘Her father gave it to her! Just like he gave her the table and chairs, and just like he gave her the curtains— Oh, and just like he gave her the —’

‘Ka’harja!’ Distro snapped. She tried to continue, but her voice crackled so much her next sentence was inaudible. She put her hands on her hips as her son started laughing.

‘Make sure to tell Krarf which caravan you put it in so he can get the stronger cart-pullers to take it,’ said Koko as she turned to leave. ‘Distro? Can I talk to you for a moment?’

‘If she can talk!’ Ka’harja called as the two women walked away.

The men waited for a moment before turning to each other and laughing loudly.

‘Women are terrifying,’ Trat snickered, though there was a hint of anxiety in his tone as he brushed a curl out of his face. Ka’harja couldn’t help but admire the man’s hair, and as the sun hit it he realised that it wasn’t actually black, but a beautiful dark blue. ‘I hear them shout and I just have flashbacks to the warden in Honey-Oak.’

‘I think it’s attractive,’ Baku admitted, his uneven grin spreading across his face again. ‘What’s more foxen than a woman who knows what she wants? You *never* found women like that in Canis! I mean, not without them being an *actual* bitch with no boundaries.’

The boys laughed, though Ka’harja just shuffled back nervously. ‘I’ll leave you to

it?' he mumbled. 'I don't think I'd be much help, I'd just throw you all off-balance.'

'Alright, tall boy,' Felelor clicked his fingers and motioned into the pantry. The rest of the men responded and followed.

Ka'harja was left standing awkwardly in the open, feeling out of place in what used to be his home. He wasn't used to being around so many people, nor was he sure how to interact with any of them. His mother had the luck of being a woman— She could bond over that with Koko.... But Ka'harja wasn't interested in the normal banter most foxen men enjoyed. He wasn't interested in girls or wrestling; he liked alchemy and plants and being alone and... and he liked his mother's sense of humour.

'Are— Are you al-alright?' a meek voice asked from beside Ka'harja, and he jumped around to see Coff. 'You l-look like you're, uh....'

Ka'harja sighed as Coff trailed off and scored the ground with his oddly-shaped boot. Ka'harja was trying to figure out what was strange about it when Coff cleared his throat, and his eyes snapped back to Coff's face. 'It's... been a long day.'

'I, uh— I im-imagine it h-has.'

The two shuffled awkwardly, unsure of how to continue.

Ka'harja took a deep breath and motioned for Coff to follow him as he started walking around the ashy remains. 'So, uh... you're a healer? Do you know much about alchemy?'

'Um, a l-little,' Coff wouldn't meet Ka'harja's eye. 'Mostly things l-like cottonflower tea and... other... medicines.'

'Cottonflower tea was the first potion I ever learnt!' Ka'harja grinned, trying to diffuse the tension. 'I still remember when Mum told me I was going to make it. I was disappointed because I thought it wasn't a real potion but... she was right. It's the most important potion I've ever made.'

Coff smiled back, though weakly. 'Cotton— Cottonflower t-tea was the first medicine I-I l-learnt, too. I remember my mentor t-telling me the number one rule for the tea was to never—'

'Charge nurlak for it!' Ka'harja exclaimed, his ears twitching with excitement. 'Yeah, that's what Mum said, too! I remember she taught me a little rhyme to help me with the recipe. *Boil the water, it's a breeze! Then into squares we cut the leaves...*'

He trailed off when he saw his mother standing alone in the middle of what used to be the main room. Even from the kitchen door-frame, he could see the pale white lines down her cheeks where her tears had washed away the ash.

'Mum?' he managed. 'Are you okay?'

Distro didn't turn as Ka'harja gently placed a hand on the back of her head, though she closed her eyes and sniffed.

Ka'harja could feel his mother trembling as he looked to where she'd been staring. He nearly cried himself when he saw it: the Eight Star tapestry, completely untouched by the smoke and flames. Shining as brightly as it had the morning before when they'd shared breakfast with Stars and Dena.

'*We're not alone,*' Distro's rasp was so quiet Ka'harja nearly missed it. '*Welten hasn't forsaken us.*'

He wasn't sure what to say as Coff stepped beside his mother and put a comforting

hand on her shoulder.

The Eight Star deities weren't real, were they? Gods didn't exist... *did they?*

Ka'harja shook his head, trying to clear it. He'd never had reason to believe in them before. Nothing had ever hinted that the deities were real, much less watching over them. *But...* he could barely deny it now, could he? His mother had turned into a dragon — She'd called Klict. Could that mean the other gods existed, too? And what about Animon? Aurn? The Okaras— If one god existed, who could say that any of the other religions weren't true, too?

He realised that this was what his mother was feeling and more, and gave her shoulder a squeeze. She sniffed again and put her face in her hands as Ka'harja glanced about the burnt-down house. He saw the caravaners watching them from a distance; sympathetic looks came from all directions as Distro's began to sob.

'Do you think the gods might actually... exist?' he finally managed to ask. 'I don't know whether I believe it or not but if you think they can, then maybe....'

'I never thought—' she cut off with another sob. 'I never thought they could before. I never *wanted* to believe but— But Klict is real. I can feel her with me— She's with me, Ka'harja! I can feel her and hear her and she's telling me things that I don't understand!' she put her hands over her ears and let out a cry. 'I don't understand! I don't understand what she wants me to do!'

Ka'harja dropped to his knees and pulled his mother into a tight embrace. He rocked her gently, side to side, and whispered to comfort her as she buried her face in his chest.

Coff shuffled nervously before joining them on the ground. 'Are y-you hearing v-voices?'

Distro shook her head as Coff began to look her over. 'It's not a *voice* voice, it's.... I don't know what it is.'

'You're— You're in a l-lot of shock,' Coff said seriously. Ka'harja was surprised that the nervous man he'd spoken to a moment before could take such a serious tone. 'You need to— To rest. Deep breaths. In... out. In... and out.'

Distro did as he said. Her chest heaved awkwardly at first but after a moment it evened out and she calmed down.

Coff put a hand on her chest when her rasp didn't clear and frowned. 'You s-sound l-like you m-might have an— An infection.'

'I've always sounded like this!' Distro snapped. Her voice cracked in protest of her volume and she started coughing. When she stopped her gaze softened and she sighed. 'The cough is new.'

Coff opened his mouth to respond, looking anxious again, but was cut short as Stars approached.

'Gighi! It's not burnt at all!' she exclaimed. 'It doesn't even have smoke on it! It's so beautiful. Do you think it's safe because of the deities that teach magic? Do you think they protected it for you because it was a gift from Ka'harja?'

Ka'harja looked up at Stars, who was looking back and forth between Distro and the tapestry. He squeezed his mother's hand as she took a deep breath.

'Yes. I think they did. I... think they're watching over us.'

Ka'harja didn't mean to sigh. But he was tired and confused. He wasn't sure what he believed anymore. 'We'll have to roll it up and pack it away, that's going to be difficult.'

'I can do it!' Stars exclaimed. 'Not to be a bahi, but Baku showed me how to roll up bedrolls and said I can roll things really mip because I have four arms! It's something I'm mip at! I can do it! Not a bakti at all!'

Ka'harja let himself smile as Stars hurried over to the tapestry and carefully unhooked it from the wall.

'I'll be careful with it!' she promised as she stumbled towards a clean patch of grass away from the house. Everyone watched as she lay the tapestry out and carefully began to roll it up. She took her time, unrolling it again whenever she made a mistake and trying to get it perfect. Her mouth was moving the whole time and Ka'harja wondered if she thought they could still hear her; though when he strained his ears he discovered she was singing to herself, and the song was so silly Ka'harja let out a laugh and had to cover his mouth with a hand.

Distro laughed too— But it turned into another coughing fit that made her grip her healing wound and sob.

'D-Did it reopen?' Coff gasped, pulling her shirt up. Then he sighed with relief. 'Thank the G-Goddess. Distro, uh... you need t-to come to my— My caravan. I need to um, make s-sure you're alright. You shouldn't be— Be around so m-much ash with that w-wound. I d-d-d— Don't want it getting con-conta— Contam— Contaminated.'

For once, Distro didn't argue. She let the boys help her to her feet and leant on Coff as he led her away. She got a few meters away from her son before she turned back.

'Ka'harja?'

'Yeah, Mum?' Ka'harja's voice broke as he responded, and he swallowed to try and hide it. 'What's up?'

'How'd you like to move out of Okatako?' she asked, gently. 'A new start somewhere we've never been before?'

He wasn't sure. A different country... was that a good idea?

'Think about it for me?' asked Distro with a weak smile.

'I will,' Ka'harja promised. He sat dumbly in the dust as his mother left with the healer. He wasn't sure what to do besides stare into the distance. *A different country...*

'You okay?' before Ka'harja could respond, Felelor had offered him his hand. 'Do you need anything?'

'I'll be fine,' Ka'harja sighed as Felelor helped him stand. He wandered away and continued kicking through the ash, deliberately avoiding eye contact with anyone who approached him.

Several times the caravaners tried to start conversation, but they eventually gave up after too many of Ka'harja's half-hearted responses. They settled for flicking his leg with their tails whenever they passed. Ka'harja was grateful that they understood, but even with everyone around him showing support, he couldn't help but feel frustrated... and guilty. It wasn't fair! All he'd done was try and help Stars and look what had happened! And the caravaners... they were so willing to help him... what if they found out that he'd stolen from them? What would they do then?

He tried not to think about it and kicked up a cloud of ash.

Something hard and a little bit heavy hit his foot and he bent down to find it. He dug a small knife out of the ashes and felt himself start to laugh.

'Guess I won't need that shovel after all,' he mumbled. He pulled the blade out of its sheath and held it up to the light. As he did he saw Trat watching him, confused. 'I uh... made a joke with my mum the night before last because I'd lost this. I said I'd need a shovel to find it....'

He trailed off, staring at the sun's reflection on the black glass.

'You alright?' Trat asked.

'Yeah,' Ka'harja inhaled sharply and sheathed the blade again. 'I'm fine.'

'Do you need anything?'

Ka'harja shrugged. There wasn't much anyone could offer him right now that would make him feel any better.

'Mm. Fire's.... It's rough,' Trat sighed, motioning to his scars in a way that told Ka'harja that he understood how he was feeling more than anyone else ever could.... Then he looked to the wall the tapestry had hung on and put his hands on his hips. 'So... your tapestry was a little lacking. You only believe in the Original Nine?'

'Yeah,' Ka'harja gave a weak grin. 'Mum thinks that Full Disciples are unnecessarily specific.'

'Don't tell Annanyn that!' Trat laughed (though, Ka'harja heard an anxious shaking in his voice). 'She's an aura sensor.'

'Maybe Annanyn can convince Mum that the other magics exist, while she's got an open mind!' he was only half-joking. He shuffled awkwardly in the quiet that followed, not meaning to look away but not able to stop himself.

'Well. I'll leave you be. And, look. If you need to talk about... *this*... I'll be an ear. Alright?'

'Thanks,' Ka'harja sighed and turned to continue his search, nearly colliding with Stars as he did. He wasn't sure how long she'd been standing behind him and almost scolded her for not announcing herself; he didn't, though, and forced a smile onto his face. 'How did you go with the tapestry?'

'Really well! I'm the *best* at rolling things up!' Stars bragged, shifting her heavy-looking load of books. 'Koko said that's the word for mip that everyone else will understand! Best! I'm the *best*! And when you see how good I did, you'll agree I'm the mip *and* the best!'

'Sure,' Ka'harja shrugged. 'Hey. Don't bother with packing up the books, they're ruined.'

'Ruined?' Stars twitched her ears curiously. 'What do you mean they're ruined?'

'You can't read them.'

'Of course I can't!' Stars scoffed. 'I can't read *anything*!'

'No, I mean they're smoke-damaged,' Ka'harja grabbed one of the books off her pile and flicked through it. 'See? They're broken. *Nobody* would be able to read these.'

'Oh, I didn't realise they were broken,' Stars sighed, her ears pressing back with her disappointment. 'I'm sorry I'm not very good at helping. I'm kimpt. I promise I'm kimpt.'

'I know you're trying, and you're doing good,' Ka'harja put a hand on her shoulder and flicked his tail against her leg. 'You've been a big help.'

He wasn't sure if that was actually true. He almost felt like it was her fault his house was gone— That if he hadn't offered to help her none of this would have happened and he'd still be trying to wake his mother for breakfast.... Probably tipping some fel cider on her face or clipping clothes pegs into her hair or seeing how high a stack of gold coins he could make on her forehead.

But it... isn't Stars' fault, Ka'harja tried to shake the thought. She wasn't the one who did this. It was Kay'oten.... Kay'oten is to blame.

'I keep doing things wrong,' said Stars. Her sad sigh brought Ka'harja back from his thoughts. 'I'm just picking up the wrong things and getting in the way. I'm kizza mup, huh? Kami mip.'

'I don't think you're the worst,' Ka'harja said with a shrug. He wanted to help lift her spirits, but he just wasn't sure if he could. Not with the way he was feeling. He just wanted to be left alone to be miserable without having to worry about anyone besides himself. But... He couldn't just leave her. She was suffering, too. 'And you're not in *my* way,' he lied. 'Why don't you stay with me? I know what's useful, and you have four arms to carry everything with!'

Stars' face broke into a wide smile. 'I could carry twice as much as you! That *would* be useful!'

Ka'harja flicked an ear and motioned for Stars to follow him. They picked through the ash for a while, collecting the few remains they could find. At first Stars' constant chatter annoyed Ka'harja; but after a while he realised it was the only thing keeping him distracted from how sad he was and he started to encourage her.

'There were a lot of these in your house before the fire,' Stars picked up a filthy glass bottle. 'Baku said they're too dangerous to keep because the heat breaks them... but this one looks okay.'

'The heat makes them crack on the inside, and they can shatter when you try and clean them, even if they look alright at first. It's not worth the effort.'

Stars didn't seem phased and dropped the bottle to the ground. As she did, something behind Ka'harja caught her eye and she waved. 'Koko!'

Ka'harja turned just in time to have something thrust into his arms.

'I think this is yours?'

It was a book— No, a calendar— No... *the* calendar. The werewolf calendar he'd gotten in Bonark. Ka'harja felt faint; had Koko looked through it? She probably did, to know it was his.

'Oh, stop panicking, I've got six brothers, I've seen my share of porn stashes,' Koko rolled her eyes.

Ka'harja let out an anxious laugh as he looked through the half-burnt drawings of muscular werewolf men. 'Thank the Eight it was the bottom half that got burnt, hey?'

Stars peered over his shoulder. 'What was on the bottom half?'

Ka'harja fumbled, unsure how to respond, but Koko nudged Stars and grinned.

'What's on the bottom half of men, Stars?' she asked with a snicker.

'Oh,' Stars carefully took the calendar from Ka'harja and began to flick through the

pages. 'I would have thought you'd have liked the bottom half to have to have not been broken. I know I would have liked to see it.'

Ka'harja pushed the thought to the back of his mind as Stars continued looking through the months. She paused on the last page.

'This one isn't damaged at all!' she held the calendar up for Ka'harja, then turned it back and looked closely. 'Gighi. He's really big. Kosson! He would be mip kata, don't you think?'

Ka'harja laughed nervously and eyed Koko, who was snickering into her hand. 'You, uh.... You can keep it if you like.'

'Gighi! Thanks!' Stars exclaimed, her face lighting up with excitement. 'I've never owned anything like this before! It's mip! I'm going to put it with everything else of mine! I have more things now, did I tell you? All farfah! Baku gave me a book and is going to teach me how to read!'

Koko playfully punched Ka'harja in the hip as Stars hurried away.

'What a fantastic gift, hey?'

'Shut up!' Ka'harja felt his cheeks burn with embarrassment. He sighed when Koko laughed. 'She might as well have it, I guess. It would have only been left behind if she didn't want it. I don't know why she's interested, though.'

'It's not like she hasn't had sex before!' Koko put her hands on her hips. 'She has a *baby*. She's probably going to enjoy that calendar a lot, you know!'

'I'm going to ignore you, now,' said Ka'harja as he turned away. 'Nothing personal, I just don't want to hear you speak ever again.'

Koko just laughed and walked away.

A few moments of fantastic silence passed, then Stars grabbed Ka'harja from behind and pulled him into a hug.

'I have to tell you about Fabecut!' she exclaimed.

'Who?'

'Little Demon's yalfit!' she grinned. 'He's not as muscular as the man in that picture, but he was still really strong and kama! He could lift me right off the ground while we were kata! It was amazing! I'd never had kata standing up before I met him— Well, I'd had kata leaning against rocks and things, but that doesn't really count as standing up, does it? Fabecut was really gentle, too! It was nice. Oh, once he—'

'Hey, hey now!' Ka'harja forced himself to laugh; it was very fake, but Stars didn't seem to notice as he cut her off. 'You're making me jealous here. Let's talk about something else.'

Stars went quiet for a moment, her ears twitching and her brow furrowed as she tried to think of something to talk about.

Relieved, Ka'harja let out a breath. The *last* thing he wanted to talk about was her sex life.... Maybe they could go back to talking about—

'He was staying around here, you know!' Stars blurted. 'We saw each other for titani blue moons! Did you ever see him?'

Ka'harja thought back, but he couldn't remember meeting any dassens in the past two or three years, let alone the last seven months. He wasn't even sure he'd ever actually met a dassen *at all* before.... No; he was sure that he'd only seen them in books.

‘Not that I recall.’

‘Oh, that’s sad, you would have liked him! He was—’

‘Ka’harja!’ Sken’s voice called over Stars, and Ka’harja turned around and waved to the woman. ‘We’ve been here all morning and I don’t think there’s much left. We should get moving!’

‘Yeah, we’ve gotten everything that was important!’ he replied.

‘You heard him!’ Sken shouted, even louder than when she’d been talking to Ka’harja. ‘Let’s go!’

Ka’harja stood dumbly as the people around him began to trek back to the caravans. He was just deciding what to do when he felt Stars lean on him and start to tremble. He hadn’t realised how tired she looked until now; the bags under her eyes and the shallowness in her breathing... they made her look half dead. And as he pet her on the back and let her bury her face into his shoulder, he wondered if he might have looked the same to her, all those years ago....

‘I miss him,’ she sighed. ‘He made me feel whole. I only feel like half of myself now. Like I’m kizza real.’

‘Hey, it’ll be alright,’ said Ka’harja. ‘It will. Things can only get better, now.’

‘I want to see Annanyn,’ Stars told him. ‘She has my Little Demon.’

‘She’s right there,’ Ka’harja pointed. ‘Do you want me to walk you to her?’

Stars shook her head. ‘I’ll be okay. Thank you for listening to me, Ka’harja. You’re a mip friend.’

‘No worries,’ Ka’harja gave an anxious grin. He wasn’t sure if that were true; if she’d heard what he’d been thinking about her she’d probably hate him. ‘I’ll be with my mum if you need me.’

Stars didn’t seem to hear him as she wandered away, which was fine with him. He made his way to the healer’s caravan and quickly patted himself down to get rid of as much ash as he could before going in.

The first thing that hit him was the unmistakable smell of antibiotics and infected blood.

Ka’harja nearly panicked, until he saw Coborn rubbing a salve her arm.

At first she didn’t see Ka’harja and continued treating herself; then she saw him staring and jumped.

‘I, uh— I messed up while cooking perch for Sken a few days ago,’ she explained, quickly pushing a bloody cloth off the table into a nearby bin. ‘Got myself.... I thought I washed it properly but....’

‘You got an abscess?’ Ka’harja shuddered. ‘Gross. You should put garlic on it.’

‘Why i-in the name of all— All— All the gods— Why— Wou— Would she ever do— Do that!’ Coff’s voice exclaimed from the corner of the room. ‘GARLIC?’

‘My mum makes garlic salves all the time,’ Ka’harja defended. ‘You mix alcohol and garlic and smear it on for about ten minutes, then wash it off with some—’

‘Honey salves a-are b-better,’ Coff interrupted. ‘Garlic bur-burns the sk-skin. And honey s-salves a-are safe for children, t-too, without the— The alcohol and time l-limits.’

Ka’harja shrugged. ‘You can’t lick it off, though.’

‘What— Why would-ould you even— *What?!*’ Coff sputtered. He frowned when

Ka'harja laughed, but then sighed and pointed to a jar next to Coborn. 'Can you p-pass me th-that? I-I'm treating y-your mother.'

Ka'harja picked up the jar as Coborn got up to leave, and made his way over to the bed his mother lay on.

'She's asleep?' Ka'harja asked, pricking up his ears to listen to his mother's snore. 'Is she alright?'

'I d-don't know,' Coff admitted, taking the jar and carefully applying its contents to Distro's wound. 'She w-was active yest-yesterday, which is— Is good, but I want to k-kee-keep an e-eye on her and make— Make sure she doesn't g-get w-worse.'

Ka'harja sat on the bed beside Coff and ran his fingers through his mother's greasy hair. He wasn't sure how to feel. Losing his house hurt enough; he couldn't bear the thought of losing his mother, too.

'U-Use... this.'

Ka'harja looked up from his mother to find Coff holding a handkerchief out to him. At first he wondered why— Then he felt the tears rolling down his cheeks and quickly accepted the rag, which turned black with soot as she pushed it into his face and let out a sob.

Awkwardly, Coff put a hand on Ka'harja's shoulder and gave it a squeeze. 'I— I know it's h-hard, but... uh... it's going to— To be o-okay. I think. Do you—'

Ka'harja shrugged him off and sniffed back his tears. 'I don't want to talk about it anymore. I'm sorry, but everyone keeps trying to talk about it and it's just making me feel worse.'

'Oh— Y-Ye.... Okay,' Coff fiddled with the hem of his shirt for a moment, then turned and began rearranging a shelf of preserved herbs and thick books.

For a while Ka'harja quietly wept into the soot-covered cloth and Coff ignored him in the most awkward manner possible. When Ka'harja finally managed to stop crying, Coff turned back to him and held up a bottle.

'Do— Do you th-think your m-mother would drink this if we— If we woke her? There's... not much left, b-but it should help.'

Ka'harja shrugged. 'We can try, but she's stubborn and usually refuses to use anything she hasn't made herself.'

'I-I know,' Coff sighed. 'I had to w-wait until she was asleep before I could clean her w-wound. I don't know how w-we can possibly get her to dri-drink any of this—'

'Hold on,' Ka'harja interrupted, jumping to his feet. 'I'll go peel the label off some beer!'

Coff cocked his head. 'You th-think th-that will w-work?'

'Why not? It's worked before!'

Chapter End.

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