

Chapter 14:
Glif 11th, Yieda
Year 10,053 AE
(Above a Cave, Apparently; Okatako)

A week had passed since the horrific fire, and the world didn't seem to notice it had happened at all. The clouds still hung in the sky, birds still chirped, flowers still bloomed, and the river still ran strong alongside the uneven road. Ka'harja hated it. He hated that the world was so happy when he was suffering so badly.

He wanted the world to be as miserable as he was. He wanted to feel like he could justify the burning anger and hatred that was bubbling in his chest; but with the insects singing out on a sunny day full of life and cool winds he felt like the awful feeling was out of place and wrong— Like if he showed anything but joy he'd ruin the day for everyone else. And all he could do about it was lag behind the caravan and hope to be left alone to simmer in his quiet rage.

His mother was still sick. Getting worse and worse by the day. She hadn't gotten out of bed in two days, and she'd fallen back to sleep almost immediately after taking her medicine that morning. She still hadn't woken up; even for her that was too long to sleep.

Ka'harja didn't understand why this was happening— She'd won the fight. She'd gotten out of the fire. She'd been resting and taking all the medication she was supposed to. Why wasn't she getting better? She was supposed to be okay....

'Ka'harja, pick up the pace! You're going to be left behind!'

If only, Ka'harja let out a frustrated groan. 'I know, Lif. I'm just... tired.'

Lif dropped his pace so he was walking beside Ka'harja. 'I know you've been through a lot. I've been there. I know— And I know this is the last thing you want to hear right now, but... you need to push a little bit harder.'

'I know,' Ka'harja sighed.

'The world doesn't stop for us, and we're already travelling at less than half our usual speed. We were supposed to be making an important sale in Bokwok in a month, which we're definitely not going to make it to. I don't think Sken would be happy if we had to slow down even more—'

'I KNOW!' Ka'harja snapped. He looked away when Lif flinched. '*I know*, alright? I know.'

'Right then,' Lif flicked an ear and picked up his pace. 'I didn't mean to upset you.... We can talk more when you're feeling up to it.'

For a moment Ka'harja wanted to shout after Lif and tell him he was sorry, but he couldn't bring himself to speak. Instead, he felt the horrible squeezing in his chest tighten even more as guilt washed over him. Lif was just trying to help; the entire caravan had been nothing but open and giving and kind to Ka'harja and his mother. Even though they definitely didn't deserve it.... They'd stolen from them, Ka'harja had secretly mocked them, and now— Now he was acting ungrateful for the help they'd given him.

He buried his face in his hands and let out a loud, pained exclamation. Why couldn't

he just be alright? Why did he have to feel so *horrible*?

He didn't notice the caravan ahead of him stop and walked directly into it with another loud shout. A tear rolled down his cheek and he swore at himself as he wiped it away, taking a moment to hide his pain before he continued to the middle of camp.

Trat was setting up a small fire with Coborn and Lif, though they seemed to be having trouble getting the damp wood lit.

'What's happening?' Ka'harja asked. He sounded more aggressive than he meant to, so he forced himself to smile. 'You, uh, making lunch?'

'We're hoping,' Trat responded, clicking two small stones together. 'If the damn fire will light! The flint's sparking but the wood's too damp.'

'Light some paper or something,' Lif suggested. 'I have my hatchet! I'll make some kindling—'

'I can do it!' Trat grumbled, smacking the small axe out of his friend's hand. 'I've made fire before!'

Coborn rolled her eyes and gave Ka'harja a look, which he easily translated into "*ugh*."

He nodded back as the boys began arguing. He almost felt guilty— Was Lif in a bad mood because of him? Had he upset him with his outburst earlier and ruined the day for everyone—

'Ka'harja, stop standing around like a goat on a flagpole and tell Trat he's being an idiot for me!' Lif's scoff interrupted Ka'harja's thoughts. 'He might actually listen to you — And if he doesn't you can pick him up and kick him across camp like a ball, you wolvern-wannabe!'

Ka'harja actually laughed at that. 'Lif's right,' he said as the tension in his chest loosened. 'Kindling lights better.'

'*Me me meh ma*,' Trat mocked, ignoring Lif's protests and smacking his flint and steel together like he was trying to dent a kitchen pot. 'I know what I'm doing—'

As he said it, Baku and Koko stepped around Ka'harja. Koko dumped a heap of paper on the fire pit, and Baku held down a bright, red-hot torch and set the paper alight.

Trat stared at the fire for a long while in silence before screaming, flinging his flint and steel across the camp, and storming off in a huff.

'Goddess in the High World *thank you!*' Coborn exclaimed. 'I thought that would never end!'

'I'm hungry, and Trat's an idiot,' Koko said gruffly before turning and walking away.

Baku was less eager to leave. 'How's things, Lif? Coborn? Ka?'

Ka'harja shrugged as the others had a laugh. He wasn't sure how he felt.

'Coff wants to try and restock some herbs that are supposed to grow in this area, to help with your mother's treatment,' Baku mentioned, shouldering Ka'harja. 'He wanted me to go with him but.... You're an alchemist, right? You know all that plant stuff? I think it'd be better if you helped.'

Ka'harja gave a nod. Baku was right; he'd be a much bigger help collecting herbs than a guard would. And it was something he could actually get out and do to be helpful

instead of standing around feeling sorry for himself.

'He'll be leaving in a bit, you might want to go offer to help now,' said Baku. 'Let him know I'll stay here if you go.'

Again, Ka'harja nodded, and made his way to Coff's caravan. He stood outside the door for a moment, unsure whether to knock or call out, but then he heard loud arguing and decided to just open the door.

'You're g-going to make yourself worse, drinking alco-alcohol while you have an in-in-infection! Where did you— Where did— Where did even you get that?' Coff ranted. 'I t-told you to st-stay in bed!'

'I'm fine!' Distro responded, taking a swig from a large bottle. 'I don't need you to babysit me! Alcohol is as good as any other medication—'

'Don't you talk that crock!' Ka'harja snapped, making Coff jump. 'Coff's not an idiot! He's a trained doctor, and you're not going to fool him with a lie like that!' he stepped into the caravan and yanked the drink out of his mother's grip.

It spilt, and Distro licked what she could off her scaly arm with a frown. 'I'm a better doctor than he is.'

'A more stubborn alchemist, you mean,' Ka'harja grumbled as he passed the bottle to Coff, who re-corked it and hid it in a locked drawer. 'We want you to get better, so stop being an arse and do as you're told!'

Distro rolled her eyes. 'Don't you scold me! I'm supposed to scold *you*! I'm your mother—'

'THEN START ACTING LIKE IT!' Ka'harja shouted. He didn't mean to raise his voice, and instantly regretted it. He stepped back and bit his lip as his mother stared at him. 'So-Sorry. I didn't mean to.... To....'

'Are you alright, Ka?' Distro asked softly. She sighed when her son shook his head and *thwacked* the mattress with her palm. 'Sit.'

Ka'harja sat and put his face in his hands. His mother began to untangle the leaves from his tail and, for a second, he felt like he was twelve eclipses again, come home after falling out of a tree and spraining his wrist.

'You're alright,' she reminded him. Her gravely voice was like a flash of magic light that chased away night-monsters, and Ka'harja felt all his anxieties melt away as she continued to comfort him. 'The worst is done, now. If we get through this, we can get through anything.'

Ka'harja took a deep breath and nodded. She was right: the worst was over. It was going to be okay. All she had to do was get better.

'Coff? Baku said you and him were going out to collect supplies,' Ka'harja's voice was the calmest it had been all day. 'He said I should go with you instead, because I'm good with herbs.'

'And fr-from the, uh, area,' Coff nodded. 'That's a... a good idea. Yes. I— I'd love the help! Th-Thank you.'

'I'll help too,' Distro rasped, propping herself up on her elbow. 'I know herbs better than either of you!'

Ka'harja glared at his mother. 'You will *not*! You're going to stay here until we're back. No drink. No getting out of bed at all!'

‘Not at all?’ she asked, looking smug. ‘What about for the toilet?’

Coff stuck his foot under the bed and slid out a metal pan. ‘That’s, um... th-that’s what this is... for.’

Distro’s triumphant expression turned frustrated and she threw herself face-down into her pillow. She mumbled something that neither boy understood before pushing herself over and sticking her foot in Ka’harja’s face.

Ka’harja batted her leg away and threw a blanket over her. ‘Promise me, Mum.’

‘Fine! I won’t get out of this bed or drink alcohol or pee on the floor until you get back. I *promise!*’

‘You won’t pee on the floor *at all!*’ Ka’harja tried to sound serious, but ending up laughing instead. ‘Alright, we should get going. Right, Coff?’

Coff nodded and the pair made their way out of camp.

As they left, Coff waved Baku over. ‘C-Can you make sure Dis-Distro gets plenty of water?’ he asked. ‘I-I won’t be gone, uh... t-too long but, um, she— She needs someone t-to keep an ey-eye on her. Oh, and uh, take the dr-drink out of my second dra-drawer, would you? I’m scared she’ll b-break the l-lock to get it. You— You know where I keep the key?’

‘Sure! I’ll check on her in a minute,’ Baku winked at the healer before grabbing his ears and giving him a playful shake. ‘Anything else you need before you head out with tall-boy?’

‘No, uh... that’s a-all,’ Coff replied, pulling away from Baku. ‘Thanks.’

Ka’harja watched as hot red embarrassment crept over Coff’s cheeks.

‘What about you, tall-boy? Need anything?’ Baku grinned at him. Something about the smile made Ka’harja feel... embarrassed. But he couldn’t tell why.

He shook his head and followed Coff, who was hurrying away from the caravan.

‘Odd man, isn’t he?’ Ka’harja laughed. ‘I mean, he seems nice enough, but he’s got that air about him. Like he knows something nobody else does.’

‘He.... He’s a good guy,’ Coff sighed, rubbing his red-hot cheeks and trying to hide the blush. ‘I w-wish he wou-wouldn’t tease me so much.’

Ka’harja shrugged. ‘At least it’s a good sort of teasing. It’s like what me and Mum do.’

‘R-Right. I don’t know how you, uh, handle her,’ Coff admitted. ‘She’s the m-most stubborn person I’ve ever— Ever met. And I— I work for *Sken!*’

Ka’harja stopped and glared at the little man. ‘I don’t appreciate that.’

‘Wh-What?’ Coff’s blush came back in a panic and he took an anxious step away from Ka’harja.

‘Talking about my mum that way,’ Ka’harja growled. ‘Don’t do it.’

‘Oh, I— I um— I didn’t mean to— I offend— Uh— I— Sorry,’ Coff managed. ‘I just — Wanted to, uh... start a, um.... Talk. To you— I—’

‘Ugh. It’s fine,’ Ka’harja held up a hand to silence Coff and sighed, realising he’d be brash. ‘It’s just that she’s one of the only people who’s ever treated me *right*. You know? I don’t know what I’d do without her. We’re so close, we even have the same dreams sometimes.’

‘The— The same dreams?’ Coff sounded shocked.

'Yeah, ever since I was a kid,' Ka'harja admitted. 'She dreams a lot more than me, but when I dream it's always the same one she had.'

'That's, uh, odd?' Coff bit his lip, sounding like he wanted to say something else. But then he turned away and pointed at a nearby copse. 'Those trees m-might have... the plants we need...'

Ka'harja shrugged and followed Coff towards the cluster of young trees. 'I wouldn't know. About the dreams I mean. The plants are probably at the trees, yeah. What exactly are we looking for, anyway?'

'Murdaro root, fal-falki leaves, hopefully s-some pulla flowers, and—' Coff was only halfway through the sentence when he crouched down and started pulling up the long grass. He carefully bound it with a thin string before putting it his satchel bag. 'And th-this.'

'Chikiti grass?' Ka'harja laughed. 'That stuff's pretty weak. You can always use mora mora root instead.'

'I— Haven't heard of th-that,' Coff admitted.

'It's from the Gallamor— I think,' Ka'harja grinned. 'Mum and I used to get it imported. Anything chikiti grass can go in, mora mora can go in, and it only costs half as much for the same dose. Even with importation fees.'

Coff quickly pulled out a notebook and scribbled down the name. 'I'll, uh, give it a tr-try sometime.'

After gathering the chikiti, they continued their search for the other plants. They chatted for a while, discussing different herbs and their uses in medicines and potions, before they split up to cover more ground. They only had to find a falki tree, now, and gather its leaves. Ka'harja hoped there was one nearby. He knew they grew near his house, but he wasn't sure if they'd spread this far out....

He ran the ingredients they'd gathered through his mind, and something seemed to click into his thoughts, though he didn't fully understand what he was thinking.

'Coff!' he called as he hurried to his companion. He slipped on a root and nearly collided with the man, but was lucky to fall flat on his face instead. He picked himself up and brushed himself down, then turned back to Coff. 'What do you need these for, anyway?'

'Just... medicine,' Coff didn't meet Ka'harja's eye, and Ka'harja felt his chest tighten.

'Baku said they were for my mum's treatment, but these aren't plants you'd use for an infected wound,' Ka'harja tried to brush it off, and let out a too-fake laugh. 'They're something you'd give a mustenel who's used too much magic!'

Coff looked up at Ka'harja and shook his head. 'Your m-mother has an— An *infection*,' he said with far too hard a tone. 'That's a-all.'

'Don't lie!' Ka'harja snapped. 'I can tell you're lying! What's wrong with her?'

Coff started stammering too much to respond.

Ka'harja sighed and turned away. 'It's *not* an infection, is it?'

'No it— It is!' Coff exclaimed. 'But it's... not her w-wound.'

Ka'harja turned back. 'What?'

'My mentor— She called it alchemist's wheeze,' said Coff. 'I thought you would—'

That you might have re-recognised it, b-being an alchemist your-yourself.'

'I haven't heard of it,' Ka'harja frowned. 'It doesn't sound like an infection.'

'It's from— From inhaling t-too much magical resi-residue,' Coff explained. 'While working on p-potions. The— The powdered ingredients get in-into the lungs and cause in-infections and... worse. Magical sicknesses that— That are hard to treat. It's— It's common when alchemists don't follow the, uh, b-basic safety precautions while w-working.'

'Boring safety precautions aren't my mum's way,' Ka'harja grunted. 'And they're not my way, either. It's too much bother for not actually changing anything—'

'It's— It's a lazy hab-habit that's made her s-sick! You're luck-lucky you're not si-sick, t-too!' Coff snapped, pointing an accusing finger at Ka'harja. 'If she'd just— Just bothered to put a cl-cloth over her mouth, she wou-wouldn't be *dying!*'

Ka'harja flinched at the last word, and Coff covered his mouth.

'No— I mean— She's not going to—' Coff couldn't find his words. 'W-We can still... help her. W-We just need to m-make the tr-tr-tr-treatment.'

Ka'harja barely heard him. He felt like he'd been struck in the gut. *Hard*. He had to sit down. But there were no seats.... He ended up dropping onto his side in the grass and curling up.

'I— I'm sorry,' Coff reached out a hand, but pulled it back at the last moment. 'P-Please don't— Don't cry. Ka'harja? Don't— Please don't. I-I'm sorry.'

It was too late. Ka'harja couldn't stop himself. The tears he'd been holding onto all week came spilling out of him all at once as he lay in the long grass.

He could hear himself, half-screaming like he was in physical pain— And he was. He cried so hard his chest ached and his stomach cramped, and then he threw up and all he could taste was a sickly, acidic bile, which just made him want to cry even more.

'Ka'har— Ka'harja?' Coff finally put his hand on Ka'harja's shoulder. 'Ka'harja, I'm — I'm sorry. I didn't mean to, uh— To snap. Your mother's g-going to get b-better.'

Ka'harja pushed himself to his knees and tried desperately to steady his breathing. 'She's— She's not though, is she?'

'She w-will.'

'She's gotten worse!'

Coff shook his head. 'She— She's just b-been t-tired— But she's been— Been getting b-better. Didn't you h-hear her to-today? Her voice wasn't s-so b-bad. And s-she wasn't coughing at all.'

That was true, Ka'harja realised. His mother hadn't sounded so bad when he'd taken the drink off her. She'd been more energetic than yesterday, and her voice was almost normal again.... But he was still worried. She still couldn't get out of bed. What if she *didn't* get better?

He swallowed the thought, and eventually calmed down enough to realise how much his head ached. He groaned and clutched it tightly.

'H-Here,' Coff held out a flask. 'Water will.... Water will help.'

Ka'harja took it, and nearly drank the whole thing without thinking.

'Are— Are you alright?' Coff asked. 'I'm... sorry.'

Ka'harja shook his head. 'It's not your fault,' he admitted. 'I've been feeling like shit

all day. This was just... the toppling card on the tower....'

Coff rested his head on Ka'harja's shoulder. It took Ka'harja a moment to realise he was getting a hug— He leant into it and took a deep breath; surprised by how much it was helping.

The pair sat together for a moment, until Ka'harja sighed.

'Thank you,' he mumbled. He was feeling better. Not perfect, but better than he had before coming out. 'We should keep looking....'

'R-Right,' Coff agreed, getting to his feet and offering Ka'harja his hand.

Ka'harja took it and let Coff help pull him up—

But then, as he tried to stand, the ground under his foot split and his leg caught in the dirt. A horrible memory flashed in Ka'harja's mind before the ground gave way and he felt himself falling.

He collided with hard stone, but he didn't stop moving; instead he lurched sideways and down again, sliding down a steep passage until everything was dark. And then he slid even further, until the world lit up again and the ground flattened out and he slowed to a stop.

He was glad he'd thrown up earlier; if he hadn't, he was sure he'd have done so on the way down.

He waited for his head to stop spinning before he tried to stand. Halfway to his feet, Coff smacked into him with a loud grunt and both boys slid further across the smooth cave floor.

'Great Star,' Ka'harja mumbled into Coff's leg. 'Where are we?'

Coff hiccuped in response and rolled over. 'I... think... I'm... going to be s-sick.'

Ka'harja sat up and pet him on the back. 'Go ahead, I won't tell.'

Coff let out a groan and puked on the stone. He choked for a moment, then flopped down to the side and rolled away from his sick.

Ka'harja didn't bother to move and instead stared up the tunnel they'd fallen down; there was nothing but black. Not even a light at the end.

He let his head drop back onto the stone. 'Fuck me.'

'Alright,' Coff moaned absent-mindedly.

For a moment, Ka'harja was stunned, then he gave a little laugh. 'Yeah, we *are* alright, aren't we?'

Coff sighed and tried to push himself up. 'I— I th-think so.'

'No broken bones?' Ka'harja joked, taking Coff's arm and pulling him up. 'Damn, that was my plan all along. Invoke the planet's wrath and kill us both!'

Coff chuckled as Ka'harja helped him to his feet. The boys stumbled for a moment before finally starting to get their bearings in the dark cave. It was huge; the roof stood tall enough that Ka'harja could stand on his own shoulders five or six times and still not reach it. Lining the roof were tiny crystals that shone like stars in the darkness.... It was almost like they were still outside, but had been tugged through time into night.

'Soulstone,' Ka'harja finally caught his breath and cursed the flesh-eating crystal. 'It's all over the floor, too! We're fucked if we stay here!'

'Never s-sleep near-ear so-soulstone,' Coff stammered, wringing his hands anxiously as his voice broke. 'H-How do we ge-get out?'

Ka'harja looked around. There were hundreds, if not thousands, of tunnels out of the main room. Some were too high to reach— Some were hidden in the floor, only visible because of their dim glow. Some led down; others led up. Some went straight.... None looked like they led out.

'It's anybody's guess,' Ka'harja shrugged. The tunnel they'd come in through was far too steep to climb. 'But I don't want to stay here and become a statue, we should go.'

Coff nodded and followed Ka'harja through the caves.

'At least we can see,' Ka'harja sighed. 'Though I don't like the idea of slowly being turned into a magical rock— Ew. Perfect example of what I don't want to be!'

The cave was a dead-end, and at the end lay a large crystal elk. The lower half looked like it belonged to a sleeping deer, but the face— The face was contorted into a terrified scream. Ka'harja scrunched his nose into a grimace as he thought about the poor creature's slow death. It wouldn't have known what was happening until it couldn't move its lower half; waking up and realising it was turning into soulstone.... It was no wonder Har'pies cursed the underground caves. Star-shining rocks and soul-eating goblins....

'Let's get out of here,' Ka'harja pushed his memories of Har'py tales to the back of his mind and nudged Coff away from the elk statue. *Goblins aren't monsters*, he reminded himself. *They're intelligent. Sapient. And they don't eat people's souls!* He shook his head to try and clear it.

'Are— Are you al-alright?' Coff asked, breaking into Ka'harja's thoughts.

'Are *you*?' Ka'harja chided. He groaned when Coff jumped. 'Sorry. I'm... really *not* okay. I can't stop thinking of... bad things. I'm freaking out a little.... Can we try talking?'

Coff nodded, pausing to think for a moment. 'So... y-you said you, uh, h-have the same dreams as your m-mother?'

Ka'harja nodded. 'Always the same ones. Otherwise I just don't dream. I don't know what's up with it—'

'It's dream walking!' Coff exclaimed. 'It's— That's what dr-dream walking is. You don't— Don't d-dream unless it's someone else's dream. You... had an Eigh-Eight Star t-tapestry in your house... how did you n-not... realise...'

Ka'harja stopped and stared at Coff for a long while. Then he laughed and continued walking. 'I'm not a dream master! I'm not *that* special!'

'*B-By the M-Moons, he's as st-stubborn as his m-mother,*' Coff whispered under his breath.

Ka'harja didn't bother to respond, and let him think he'd gone unheard. But the thought of his mother made him anxious. 'So, what's alchemist's wheeze like? How long has she had it for?'

'Years,' said Coff. 'But I— I think the tr-trauma from the sm-smoke triggered the severe stages. H-How d-did you not n-notice how bad her breathing was getting? The changes in her v-voice alone would have—'

'I noticed that she sounded different!' Ka'harja snapped. He softened his voice when Coff flinched. 'I told her, but she said she was alright. I didn't know that it was because she was sick— How *could* I have known? All I know is what she's taught me.'

The sound of Coff's sigh said more than he could have managed with words. It

pierced Ka'harja painfully, and he decided that it was best to end their conversation there.

They continued wandering the caves for what they could only assume was hours. Ka'harja ached, and Coff didn't sound much better as he panted and staggered along. They needed to rest but... they couldn't. Not with so much soulstone around.

Ka'harja looked into a smaller cave as they passed, only to realise it was completely black inside. His heart skipped a beat. *A dark cave meant no soulstone!* They could sit down and rest!

He grabbed Coff's shoulder and turned him into the cave. Only three or four steps in, the healer collapsed on the floor and curled up. Ka'harja dragged him a little further before lying down nearby.

'It's c-cold,' Coff mumbled.

Ka'harja agreed, and shifted until they were back-to-back. He could feel Coff shivering, and after a moment turned around and put an arm around him, trying to keep him warm.

'Th-Thank you,' Coff managed. 'I'm so t-tired. And hun-hungry.'

'Me too,' agreed Ka'harja, curling into his companion. He'd been looking forward to lunch, but now he lay here hours later, exhausted and cold and tired and feeling like shit. 'Let's get some sleep.'

Chapter End.

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