

**Chapter 15:**  
**Glif 11<sup>th</sup>, Yieda**  
**Year 10,053 AE**  
**(An Underground Cave; Okatako)**

Ka'harja couldn't tell how much time passed before Coff's breathing evened out; it felt like an entire day had gone by just lying in the dark. *Had* it been a day yet? He was so tired... yet he couldn't sleep. All he could do was listen to the *drip-drip-drip* of far-off water, and the scrabbling of... rats, maybe? Something small and light and fast. Too far away to matter.

He shuffled closer to Coff and tried to steal what little warmth he could from him.

He was finally drifting off when he realised the strange cave ambience was growing stranger. The rat's scrabbling was getting closer. And more frantic. Behind it, a heavier shuffling noise resounded— Like feet being dragged along the floor on their way to bed. A hiss, and then a high-pitch squeal of pain sounded through the cave. It was cut off abruptly by a crunch, falling pebbles, and loud laughter.

Coff sat bolt upright and let out a shriek of his own. Ka'harja quickly covered his mouth with a hand to muffle him, but it was too late. The cave had gone completely silent except for the dripping water.

A feeling of dread washed over Ka'harja as the quiet shuffling came back. He leant over Coff and held his breath; perhaps whatever it was wouldn't see them in the darkness? He wasn't sure how long he could cope— His heart was beating so hard it was impossible to hear anything else.

Then a shadow appeared at the cave entrance and both boys tensed. It was grotesque. Humanoid, but its silhouette was twisted; hunched over like an ugly, malnourished monkey with a bobble-head that was fitted wrong.

The only consolation for Ka'harja was that it was tiny. It was barely the size of a foxen man; only half the height of Coff and twice as thin, in its crouched form. He could kick it away easily and bolt—

A second shadow appeared and Coff's grip on Ka'harja tightened. Ka'harja didn't dare to breathe. No matter how much his chest hurt.

As he watched, the second silhouette slowly raised a limp form to its mouth and a sickening crunch filled the cave.

The first creature turned abruptly and smacked its companion. 'THAT'S MINE AS MUCH AS YOURS!' it shouted.

Ka'harja took this chance to let out his breath and take another.

'I caught it!' the second creature complained. 'You were too busy drinking to see it!'

'We agreed to share all our food! I've been sharing mine with you! Don't you dare not share with me!'

'I haven't eaten the whole thing, Kerkek, you dried up slug!' the second creature hit its companion back. 'I took *one* bite!'

'A big one, too, I bet! You never share, Duk! You never share with me! Mother would be ashamed!'

‘Don’t bring Mother into this!’ Duk responded. ‘She’d tell you to stop throwing a tantrum and go hunt for yourself!’

Ka’harja nearly laughed at the outburst; the arguing was childish, if not absolutely ridiculous, and his fear ebbed away. He gave a small cough and the cave fell silent.

‘Hello?’ Kerkek questioned the darkness. ‘Gilip? Is that you? I’ll rip your nose off if you’re hiding in shadows again!’

‘I’m not Gilip,’ Ka’harja chuckled. ‘My name’s Ka’harja.’

‘Kar-har-sa?’ Duk snickered. ‘That’s not goblin! What are you? An orc? A kobold? Some sort of weird soft-flier who’s learned how to speak with their mouth instead of their hands?’

‘Kah-har-ja,’ Ka’harja corrected. ‘And I’m foxen.’

‘Ooh, I *love* foxens!’ Kerkek exclaimed. ‘You up-worlders all so *quirky*! Is it only you in there?’

Coff tugged on Ka’harja’s arm, desperately trying to keep him from saying anything else; but Ka’harja figured honesty would be best in this situation.

‘I’m with a friend,’ he said. ‘We’re lost.’

‘Well come out of the shadows! Come out of the shadows!’ Kerkek’s exaggerated motions made him look even more chimp-like as he scrambled to stand upright. ‘Let’s get a look at you and see if we can’t make a deal!’

‘A deal?’ Ka’harja asked, tugging the resisting Coff out of the cave with him. ‘What do you mean “a deal”?’

‘Well, directions don’t come free!’ Duk cackled. ‘You pay for what you get!’

‘Pl-Please don’t h-hurt us,’ stammered Coff.

Duk and Kerkek stared at the boys as they came into the soulstone-lit passageway... and the boys stared back at the goblins. They weren’t so bad, up close. They had skin as green as a seces, dotted with warts and out of place hairs— But their smiles were wide and their eyes surprisingly sweet as they looked the boys over.

‘Wow,’ Kerkek exclaimed. ‘You’re a tall one!’

‘Attractive, too,’ Duk gave a wistful sigh and started to fan herself with her hand. ‘It’s a shame you’re a couple, or I might have made the payment marriage!’

‘We’re not—’ Ka’harja didn’t finish the sentence before Coff stamped on his foot. His voice broke, but he barely missed a beat when he realised the second half of Duk’s sentence. ‘*Very* rich! We don’t have any money on us.’

‘Come again?’ Kerkek cocked his head and scratched a few large pimples on his chin.

‘W-We d-don’t have any m-money,’ Coff managed. He dug through his pockets. ‘I only h-have, uh, th-three gold—’

‘Why would we want *gold*?’ Duk frowned. ‘There’s a nugget the size of a bear a few hundred meters down.’

‘Useless lump of metal!’ Kerkek agreed.

‘Then what *do* you want?’ Ka’harja bit his lip. There wasn’t really too much they could give them.

‘I’m glad you ask!’ Kerkek started down the cave, motioning for the others to follow. ‘We —my sister and I— are artists!’

‘And not just your mediocre rock-carvers, either!’ Duk screeched happily. ‘We’re *soulstone* carvers!’

Ka’harja laughed, trying to keep the two in a good mood with conversation. The goblins were their only chance out of the caves; they couldn’t risk being abandoned. ‘I thought that was a felinic art!’

‘It is, it is!’ Kerkek chuckled. ‘We learnt it in the Gallamor!’

‘Oh! You’ve been to the Gallamor?’ Ka’harja hoped his interest didn’t sound too fake. He couldn’t care less about foreign countries at the moment. All he cared about was getting back above ground.

‘We’ve been all over the planet!’ Duk exclaimed. She met Ka’harja’s eye and gave an exaggerated flutter of her lashes that turned his stomach. ‘We’re cultured, you know. We sell our art to all kinds of people all over the world!’

‘Yes! And not just art! Items too!’ Kerkek motioned to a small cave with a flick of his wrist. ‘That’s our studio, go in. We’ll join you in a second.’

Duk looked confused. ‘We’re not going in? Why?’

‘I’m hungry!’ Kerkek complained. ‘I’m going to go hunt something!’

Duk threw the headless rat at him. ‘Eat that, I want to start carving!’

Grumbling like a child through a mouthful of rodent, Kerkek pushed past his sister and into the crevice, where he disappeared into the cave beyond.

Coff was next, following nervously. He gave Ka’harja a look as he entered; a mix of terror and frustration. Ka’harja could almost hear the man’s thoughts.

*If we die, I’m going to kill you!*

‘Go on, handsome!’ Duk exclaimed, planting her hand on Ka’harja’s butt. ‘Wish I was carvin’ this!’

Ka’harja felt like his internal organs were going to fail on him just to save him from the embarrassment of the situation. He’d barely managed to enter the cave when Kerkek was upon him, shoving animal skulls in his face.

‘This is from a rabbit we killed in Tcku! And this one is a dragon skull from under Yjula!’ Kerkek flashed the skulls so quickly Ka’harja barely had time to see them.

Duk started jumping up and down in excitement. ‘NO! NO! I KNOW ONE HE’LL LIKE!’

Before Ka’harja could refuse, a skull was thrust into his arms. He didn’t want to look at it, and at first kept his eyes on Coff, who looked faint with worry as he stared at what the goblins had pressed into Ka’harja’s arms.

Slowly, Ka’harja forced himself to look. He was expecting something like a dog skull, or maybe the skull of another goblin with the way Coff was staring.... He screamed when he saw it and instinctively dropped it.

Kerkek caught it with a laugh ‘Got this about nine years ago from under the Heck’ne!’ he exclaimed. ‘Ripped it right out of a foxen’s head, we did!’

‘He was dying, anyway,’ Duk shrugged, and waved a hand to dismiss Ka’harja’s sputtering. ‘We just... finished him quickly. He barely knew it was happening!’

There was a *thump* as Coff fell to the floor, unconscious.

Ka’harja quickly dropped to his knees and tried to revive him; unsure how the goblins would react. He heard them whispering and twitched an ear to listen.

*'If he's dead, I have dibs on his brain,'* Kerkek whispered to his sister.

*'If he's dead, I have dibs on his boyfriend!'* Duk whispered back.

It took a second, but Coff's eyes fluttered open and he groaned. Ka'harja helped him sit, supporting his weight with the back of his hand.

Kerkek flashed the skull in Coff's face with an impish grin. 'You want to buy it?'

'No, thank you,' replied Ka'harja. 'We're not into bones.'

'Suit yourself,' Kerkek replied. He rolled the skull away like a ball and turned to his sister. 'Which do you want?'

'I want the tall one!' Duk exclaimed. 'I want to memorise every nook and cranny on that handsome face of his.'

'Can we just get this over with?' Ka'harja sighed.

'Pshht, fine,' Kerkek rolled his eyes. 'Sit still.'

## **Chapter End.**

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