

Chapter 16:
Glif 11th, Yieda
Year 10,053 AE
(An Underground Cave; Okatako)

Ka'harja had to admit: the goblins were skilled artists. The statues were impressively made. Accurate, smooth, and detailed; they almost looked like actual people who'd been absorbed by the rock.

And the goblins hadn't been rude while carving. They'd held quite pleasant, if not odd, conversation.... In fact, the worst part of the whole experience for Ka'harja was watching Duk try to impress him by bending backwards so far she'd folded herself in half and stuck her head between her legs.

'And that's the exit,' Kerkek pointed. 'Leads you right to the river. Don't trip on your way out!'

'Or do, and fall into my arms,' Duk gave a wistful sigh, her chest heaving with the breath.

'You'd be crushed,' Kerkek grumbled.

'Only physically!' she snapped back. Then she turned to Ka'harja and gave what looked like it was *supposed* to be a seductive wink. 'If he leaves, the emotional burden may be too much.'

Ka'harja took a deep breath and gave an awkward wave. 'See you... later.'

'Ka'harja!' Coff called from down the cave. 'Ka'harja, it's the m-middle of the n-night!'

'What?!' Ka'harja exclaimed, hurrying to his companion's side. He stared out the cave's opening into the dark, cloudy night and cursed viciously.

'Is something the matter?' Duk asked, stalking up to the boys in a strange, chimp-like stance.

Ka'harja nodded. 'We've wasted the whole day in this cave! We were supposed to be collecting herbs!'

'For your sickly mother?' she clicked her tongue sadly. 'Oh dear. Maybe we can help?'

'It won't be free,' Kerkek hissed, shoving his sister and lowering his voice. '*We already gave them cheap directions!*'

Cheap? Ka'harja almost laughed. They'd spent hours posing for the artists and only gotten twenty minutes of guidance in return. That certainly wasn't—

'I KNOW IT WON'T BE FREE!' Duk snapped. Then she coughed and shook herself down, returning to her sweet tone as she turned to the boys. 'I'm so sorry about my brother, he's insensitive.'

'Ay, I was born near the surface, what do you *want* from me?' rolling his eyes, Kerkek pushed himself up straight, almost doubling his height as he addressed the boys. 'What herbs do you want?'

'Just falki lea-leaves,' Coff mumbled. 'Half a jar should do.'

'Half a jar?' Duk frowned. 'What size jar are we talking about?'

‘W-Wolven medical standard—’ he cut off when the goblins shrugged and pulled faces. ‘Um, I mean, a l-litre jar.’

‘Oh, we can fill that easy!’ Duk exclaimed. ‘Falki leaves are great for making tattoo ink with, and Nappo always keeps them around.’

‘But that means you *definitely* have to pay us upfront,’ Kerkek explained. ‘Something he’d trade for.... Duk? What’s he like?’

‘Meat. Bugs. Fingers. Hair—’

‘My ponytail!’ Coff exclaimed, tugging a knife out of his pocket. ‘Pl-Please, take it, and g-get us the h-herbs from— From Nappo!’

Ka’harja almost gagged as the blade sliced through Coff’s long, golden half-braid. His hair was as long as he was tall! And now he’d cut it off above the tie, leaving him with a messy almost-nothing style. He held it out to the goblins, who considered it seriously.

‘That’s a bit... much for a jar of herbs, don’t you think?’ Kerkek frowned. ‘We don’t want to overcharge. We have a reputation to keep.’

‘Then give us something else with it!’ Coff snapped through grit teeth, the remnants of his anxious self disappearing in his frustration. He was almost like an entirely different person. ‘A statue or s-something!’

‘A statue of what?’ Duk asked.

‘I d-don’t c-care! *Surprise me!*’

Duk looked to her brother, who nodded, and then hurried down the cave with Coff’s ponytail.

She returned quickly, though the wait felt like forever to Ka’harja. He wanted to get back to his mother. And eat something; he was starving.

‘Here is your jar,’ Duk held out the herbs to Coff, who examined them closely. ‘And a statue. It’s a falcon. Though it’s old. A few chips and not the best made; it looks a bit like a pigeon if you ask me.’

Ka’harja took the statue from her. He tried not to cringe as she ran her hand over his own, and forced himself to smile. ‘We should go.’

‘I’ll see you again, won’t I?’ Duk asked. ‘You’re too cute to vanish into the night!’

Ka’harja bit his lip. He hoped he never saw her again, but he wasn’t going to tell her that. ‘Maybe. I mean, you’re travellers! So who knows what’ll happen.’

Duk seemed satisfied with this answer; her brother did not. He grabbed her arm and pulled her down the tunnel, mumbling in their native tongue as she protested.

‘Don’t be a scrumble-butt!’ he snapped as they turned down a side cave.

‘I’M NOT A SCRUMBLE-BUTT!’ Duk shrieked, and the pair’s heavy footsteps slapped down the tunnel as they chased each other and argued.

‘L-Let’s go,’ Coff’s sigh made Ka’harja jump. He sounded exhausted.

Ka’harja nodded and stumbled into the long grass ahead of his friend.

‘Whoa!’ Ka’harja exclaimed, his foot sending a flurry of rocks rolling into the river. ‘Careful! It’s steep, and the river’s closer than I thought!’

Coff carefully made his way to Ka’harja and the two looked around for a moment, getting their bearings. It was almost pitch black; the clouds covered all but the smallest shimmer of the pink moon and the water reflected nothing in the night.

Ka’harja felt a surge of panic; they were lost! They were—

'Th-There's a l-light over there,' Coff exclaimed, and Ka'harja strained to see which direction he was facing. 'I think i-it's th-the camp.... If not, um... at least we'll find s-someone, right?'

'Yeah,' Ka'harja agreed, brushing his tail against Coff; as much for the healer's comfort as for his own. 'It's our best bet.'

Before he could start across the field, he felt Coff's hand enclose around his— Or, he hoped it was Coff's hand and that Duk hadn't come back. He felt an anxious squeeze as Coff pressed against him and let out a long breath.

'You alright?'

'Yeah, I j-just don't w-want to g-get separated,' Coff stuttered, sounding more like himself.

Ka'harja nodded, and the two made their way towards the small light in the distance.

They were halfway when they heard Koko give a shout:

'TRAT IF YOU DON'T GET THAT LOG OUT OF YOUR ARSE I'LL PULL IT OUT MYSELF!'

Ka'harja finally felt like he could breathe again. He didn't even realise he had broken into a run until Coff let go of his hand and trailed behind at a distance.

He nearly slammed into a caravan in his haste to get back to his mother. He veered to the side to avoid it— And collided with Sken.

'Where in the everlasting expanse of the darkest corners of the sky have you been!' she snapped. 'We thought— HEY! Come back here! I'm not done with you, Ka'harja! Coff? COFF! Get back here! Don't ignore me you— Coff!'

Ka'harja nearly leapt up the stairs to see his mother; she jolted upright when he burst through the door and collapsed in a heap on the floor.

'Ka'harja!' Distro exclaimed, rolling out of bed and grabbing her son in a hug. 'I was so worried! *Where* have you *been*? Are you okay? You're not hurt are you? Have you eaten? You're covered in dirt! You look like you fell in a hole!'

'Spot on,' Ka'harja mumbled, rolling onto his back as Coff stepped over him and dropped his satchel on his workbench. 'I fucking.... I hate goblins. I *hate* them!'

Distro leant over him and kissed his cheek. 'Tell me everything.'

'Yes! Tell us *everything*!' Sken panted from the doorway. 'Explain why we had to miss an entire day of travel because a "twenty-minute" scavenger hunt took over *eight hours*!'

'Eight hours?' Ka'harja swallowed. 'That's how long we were gone?'

'At least!' Sken growled. 'We stopped counting when the clouds got too thick to see the time!'

Ka'harja gave a pathetic whine. 'I'm hungry.'

Sken's entire body seemed to shrink as she sighed, her gills squealing, and she sat on Distro's abandoned bed. She rubbed between her eyes for a moment before flicking the barb on her tail and jumping up. 'I'll get Coborn to make you boys some dinner, and then you can tell us what happened,' she paused at the door. 'I'm glad you're both okay. Don't you dare worry us like that again.'

Chapter End.

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