

Chapter 2: Glif 5th, Minda Year 10,053 AE (The Nigelle Farmhouse; Okatako)

Ka'harja stretched and stood up straight, cursing the cramped alchemy room. Four hours leaning over a foxen alchemy table would do in the back of anyone with even the slightest amount of height on them... but Ka'harja was almost twice as tall as a normal foxen his age, and so he felt like death.

Instinctively he turned to call out to his mother, only remembering at the last second that he didn't want to wake her. He grinned and twitched his sensitive fox-like ears to listen to her snore.

It was loud, which meant she was in a deep sleep. But it was uneven, broken with snorts and grunts like she was choking. He remembered meeting someone else who sounded like she did, once, though he couldn't remember who.... He shook that thought from his mind and made a mental note to bother his mother into visiting a healer.

Not that she would; she never did. She always said she was fine, but Ka'harja had a feeling she wasn't being completely honest with him—

He shook his head again. He didn't want to think about it.

Instead he picked up the mortar and poured the clear, water-like liquid into an empty bottle. He laughed a little when he saw the label: it was an old vinegar bottle. Fitting for the texture of the potion... if he hadn't known what was in it he may have assumed it was just normal vinegar and dipped a fried spider or two in it. Perhaps a prank he could play on his mother later.

Distracted by his own sense of humour, Ka'harja didn't notice the bottle on the floor and went sliding across the room with a shriek and a loud *CLUNK* as he landed on his back.

Pain shot through his right leg and he nearly screamed again.

He banged his head heavily on the floor and waited for the cramp to ease itself out before finally letting himself take a breath; which still came out as a cry of agony.

'Ka'har...' Distro's voice called, trailing off.

'I'm fine!' he wasn't. He wasn't. He wanted to be dead.

After the cramp was over Ka'harja got to his feet and rubbed the sore muscle. He hated his weak leg. It was a constant reminder of his.... His *luck*. He shook the thought from his mind.

No use in worrying about past pains, he told himself. Better to focus on the now. The now pains. The pains I have now.

He limped awkwardly out of the pantry-converted-to-alchemy-room and began looking through the kitchen cupboards. It didn't take him long to find what he was looking for: an old canvas sack in the high cupboard above the stove. He couldn't remember why they'd decided to keep it in the kitchen (or in a cupboard that Distro could barely reach) but that seemed to be its place now. At least it was out of the way of any curious guests his mother might have over.

Sighing, Ka'harja reached into the cupboard and gripped the sack's corner. As soon as his skin made contact with the cloth the sack vanished from view, and Ka'harja groaned.

He knew it was going to happen. The whole purpose of the sack was for it to turn invisible, after all.... But he really wished his mother had gotten a command-triggered enchantment instead of a touch-triggered one. It would have made it so much easier to find its opening, instead of having to fumble around with the air just to find the drawstring.

It was a pain, but he finally managed to figure out which part of the sack was where and peeked inside the opening.

The inside was clearly visible even though the outside wasn't. He squinted his eyes; trying not to let the perspective of the there-but-not-there object mess with his brain.... At least it was empty and had no holes worn into it.

He chucked the potion phial into the sack and fumbled with the air a moment more, probably looking quite silly, before making his way into the main room of the house.

The place was illuminated in a dull blue glow; the orange evening light had long since faded and all that was left was the light from the soulstone pieces embedded carefully into the sill of each window.

Ka'harja had never liked the glowing crystals—they reminded him of old horror stories from his childhood in the Heck'ne, which always made him queasy—but he couldn't deny they were safer than using fire to light the house at night. No need to put them out, no chance of burning the house down. The only real risk was if he broke off the diamond casing and ate it.

He shuddered at the thought, which he promptly pushed to the back of his mind as he carefully stepped over to check on his mother.

She was still asleep, thank the eighth child. Not that Ka'harja was worried about waking her; she'd slept through the noise of him sliding across the floor and shrieking, so she wasn't about to wake up from him putting something in a drawer.

He sighed, and slid his necklace over his head. He didn't care about losing the rest of his clothes when he'd inevitably have to strip for the robbery, but he didn't want to lose his necklace.

It wasn't anything special, *really*; just a piece of rope with a cutting of his mother's hair.... But it was the most valuable thing he owned. To him, at least. She'd given it to him after his adoption had become official. The day he legally became her son.

He could shave her head and tail and none of it would mean as much as this tiny cutting did.

Though... maybe he should shave her head and tail anyway? He'd love to see her reaction to that! Plus he could justify it as revenge for the time he'd woken up with his feet tied together.

He shook his head to clear it, and quickly shoved the necklace in the bedside table's top drawer. *Stop getting distracted!*

He always got distracted. By everything. He couldn't hold his focus— Unless it was on something stupid, like the stains on the bathroom wall. Then he couldn't pull himself away from it.

As tempted as he was to go into the bathroom and stare at the dog-shaped stain again, he forced himself to go outside.

He shut the door behind him. Then hesitated.

The air was... *different*. Something ominous seemed to carry on the breeze as the night-bugs fell silent and the owls refused to hoot.

Had something happened? What could—

His ear twitched as he heard it. A far-off scream of pain.

Slowly, he turned to the direction of the noise and stared across the open field.

It sounded again, and he sighed.

The scream was coming from the nearby wasteland.... So there was nothing he could do to help. If a Har'py was dying it wouldn't change anything to go find them; he'd only get himself killed, too.

'Block it out,' he whispered to himself. *'You can't help them. Just block it out and go do your job.'*

Chapter End.

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