

Chapter 3: Glif 5th, Minda Year 10,053 AE (The Nigelle Farm; Okatako)

The night was beautiful, as usual. Stars twinkled in the nearly-cloudless sky as two almost-full moons lit up the world brighter than the nebula behind them; washing the grassy field in silver and blue.

Ka'harja couldn't see the third moon, but that was fairly normal in Okatako. The tiny pink moon was rarely more than a sliver on the horizon, and the few nights it was supposed to be full there always seemed to be a cover of clouds to block the view....

'Shit—' Ka'harja lost his balance as he stepped in a hole. He'd barely managed to catch himself before he tripped in another and landed in a heap on the ground. '*Fuck.*'

He let himself lie in the grass for a moment before awkwardly sitting up and picking at an itch behind his ear. He tugged off a scab, only to realise it was a swollen tick. Wrinkling his nose, Ka'harja crushed the pest between his fingernails until he heard a satisfying crack and felt a droplet of blood roll down his thumb. He flicked the tick away and licked the blood off his hand.

Then he heard voices, and quickly clambered to his feet and ducked into a nearby ditch to hide.

He didn't think he'd get caught— At least not yet. The voices were approaching but they were still pretty far ahead. There was plenty of time to get ready and avoid whoever it was.

Ka'harja took a deep breath. He had to get the potion out of the invisible sack.... He fumbled with it for a few moments before finally finding its opening and retrieving the small bottle. Then he hesitated.

He'd dismissed his mother's concerns earlier, but he knew she was right: modification potions were dangerous. All it would take for his invisibility potion to become a turn-me-inside-out potion was an extra half-spoonful of powered gryphon beak.

And that was one of the *less* painful accidents!

Ka'harja shook himself down. The people who those voices belonged to would eventually find him if he didn't try the potion. It wasn't *really* a big deal if they found him all the way out here.... After all, he lived in the area and they wouldn't have any idea it was him who'd been stealing, but... he didn't like the idea of meeting the people he was going to rob. If he didn't get friendly with them then he wouldn't have any reason to feel guilty about stealing from them.

Plus he just preferred to avoid social situations. They were boring and exhaustive.

'Bottoms up, I guess,' Ka'harja sighed as he uncorked the phial and closed his eyes. He gagged as he swallowed the sickly-sweet potion, but managed not to throw up. Which was always a plus.

It tasted like sugar and bread, which meant he'd had made it right.

A wave of relief washed over him as he pulled a face and licked the roof of his

mouth to try and get the taste out; as much as he hated the sweet taste of the potion he couldn't complain that he wasn't going to explode or have all his hair fall out.

A tingle crept through his skin and he felt a wave of cold shivers shoot up his spine. He burped and a small pink mist floated in front of him like a colourful cold morning breath.... He wasn't sure why it happened when he drank potions, but it always did.

Ka'harja scowled and gave a cough to clear his throat. His mother *never* burped pink! Why did he have to?!

He fanned the pink away with his hand— Though all he saw was the mist thin and fade into the air as if hit by a sudden gust of wind.

Looking himself over Ka'harja couldn't help but chuckle: his clothes looked like they were floating on their own and every movement they made was hilarious to watch. He danced in place for a moment, laughing at himself, before remembering there were people nearby and hunkering down to listen.

The voices were closer than he realised, and Ka'harja found it impossible not to twitch his sensitive ears and eavesdrop while waiting for them to walk past.

'I'm telling you, something's wrong!' a shivery voice exclaimed. 'Did you hear the shouting earlier? It was like something out of a nightmare!'

'It was just a couple of Har'pies having a tiff,' came the reply. 'You need to relax, Naranako.'

'But the Har'pies don't come this far into Okatako!' Naranako responded.

Yes, they do! Ka'harja snickered, then remembered how much he wished the Har'pies *didn't* come this far into Okatako and scowled.

'Felelor, I'm really freaking out! This isn't how night's supposed to feel.'

'I'm sure it's perfectly normal for this time of year,' the voice called *Felelor* dismissed Naranako's concerns. 'It's not like the place is haunted or anything!'

An idea sparked in Ka'harja's mind and his heart fluttered. Trying to hold back laughter, he picked up a stone and threw it towards the voices.

'What was that?!'

Felelor barked a laugh. 'Maybe it was a ghost!'

'Felelor, don't!' Naranako sounded close to tears.

'A Har'py ghost maybe!'

Ka'harja threw another stone and the laughter stopped.

'You heard it that time, didn't you?'

The pair mumbled to each other and Ka'harja strained his ears to hear them. He couldn't understand what they were saying but he heard their footsteps approaching and their argument became clearer.

'*It's ghosts!*' Naranako whispered.

Felelor snapped a quiet response. '*For Scara's sake, I was joking! It's probably just a bird!*'

'*If it's "just a bird" then why are you whispering, too?*' came Naranako's panicked response.

The argument continued, and the entire time Ka'harja was trying not to laugh. He decided to torment the poor men further and took a deep breath.

'GET OUT!' he shouted, putting on a deep, raspy voice. 'Get off of my land!'

Naranako's scream could be easily compared to a boiling kettle's screech, and Ka'harja heard him fleeing in the other direction.

'Naranako you turd!' Felelor shouted after him. 'Get back here! It's just the wind!'

Ka'harja laughed out loud and began to pull off his clothing. It was hard, not being able to see what he was doing, but he was having too much fun to stop. 'How deaf are you?'

'Not deaf enough!' Felelor responded. 'Don't think you're any good at this, my nephew's an idiot who's scared of his own shadow! But me? Not so much.... So come out here now and apologise, and I'll spare you a good beating! Even if you are a Har'py.'

'I don't think so,' still laughing, Ka'harja managed to undress completely and snuck out of the ditch.

He finally got a good look at Felelor. He was quite old. Not ancient, but at least forty eclipses. A somewhat handsome, red-haired foxen.

Ka'harja squinted. *Literally* red hair, it looked like he had smeared tomatoes on his head! Ka'harja bit his lip, trying to keep silent as he crept around the man. He saw Felelor had a sword strapped to his belt. It was two-handed and heavy-looking, and Ka'harja could tell he preferred strength over speed.... He wouldn't find it hard to outrun Felelor if anything went wrong.

Perfect.

'Show yourself!' Felelor snapped.

Rolling his eyes, Ka'harja stepped behind the man. 'Sorry, can't do that.'

Felelor whirled around and looked directly at where Ka'harja was standing. He frowned and began spinning around as he searched for the impossible-to-find boy.

'Don't bother to throw your voice,' he barked. 'I'm not falling for any tricks!'

'You've already fallen for about four of them,' Ka'harja couldn't help himself and picked up another rock; a small one. It hit Felelor in the back of the head and the man turned to lunge at nothing.

'WHERE ARE YOU?!' he screeched as he drew his sword. 'I'LL KILL YOU, YOU LITTLE SHIT!'

Ka'harja held back a snicker. *Boy did he get mad quick!*

'I'm a ghooooooooooooost!' he called. He began to dance around Felelor, who followed his voice frantically. 'Boo! Blah! Growl!'

'*Shut up!*' Felelor snapped. Ka'harja heard his voice break. 'Shut the fuck up!'

Ka'harja stopped yelling and walked quietly up to Felelor. Slowly, he reached out and tugged on the old man's tail.

Felelor screamed, dropped his sword, and bolted in the direction he'd been facing.

'That was fun,' Ka'harja grinned, nudging the heavy sword with his foot. 'But now back to business!'

Far too pleased with himself, Ka'harja jumped into the ditch and retrieved the magic sack. He quickly decided to leave his clothes behind. They were a size too small and getting tattered anyway.... Although it was freezing and Ka'harja wished he had a set of clothes that were enchanted like the sack. Warmth without compromising invisibility? Now that *would* be fantastic! He should ask his mother about it sometime— He shook his head. *Focus! You're only a few ditches away from the caravan, do you*

want to get yourself caught?

He tried to creep both quickly and quietly, but it was difficult enough to do *one* of them without being able to see his own feet. Gingerly, he put his foot down and watched the grass crush under nothing. Then he felt a sharp pain and quickly moved his foot over a few centimetres. He'd nearly stepped on a rock! It was as bad as walking in pure darkness!

'Look, all I'm saying is Coborn isn't unattractive!'

Ka'harja looked up so quickly his neck hurt as he pricked up his ears and listened for the voice he'd heard. He was much nearer to the caravan than he'd thought! He'd been so focused on watching the ground that he hadn't been paying attention to what was ahead of him and now he could see it was only a few meters away.

'Sure, she smells like onions and oil,' the voice laughed. 'But have you seen those hips? Yes, *please!* I'd put her on my dick any day!'

'Lif, you're the crudest mother fucker I know,' the scolding was followed by a snorted laugh. 'You'd put *anything* on your dick.'

'I wouldn't put *you* on my dick, you ugly fuck!' Lif hissed in response. 'Get fucked, Trat.'

Trat laughed again. 'And yet you're still lonely enough to consider fucking onion girl! Man, we need to get to I'reka quick so you can get yourself a good avio woman. You know they'll get with basically anyone who smiles at them! Even *you'll* have a chance. Heh.... I could even set you up with Keemi, if you'd like.'

Lif gave a short, dismissive laugh. 'Yeah, right. Like I'm interested in a fling like that.'

For a moment, the two voices went silent. Then Trat spoke again.

'And what were you intending to do with Coborn?' he asked. 'Marry her?'

'I— *No!*' Lif's voice broke. 'That's not what I meant!'

'You like her?!'

'No! I don't!' Lif defended. 'I mean she's hot—'

'She's really not—'

'—but she's just not my type, you know?'

'Right,' Trat scoffed. 'And I don't like eating fried spiders! Goddess, Lif, I knew you had bad taste, but *onion girl?* Really? *Really?!*'

Ka'harja folded his ears back to block out their voices. Any remorse the young thief felt for robbing the caravan was gone. He crept close enough to the caravan that he could see the speakers clearly and shook his head. It was just the two of them, leaning against a caravan in their pyjamas with a bottle of something each, their dark hair falling messily over their faces as they scratched and sniffed and joked with each other.

To talk about a woman that way! Ka'harja growled to himself. *What a dickbag.*

He skirted around the pair and stuck out his tongue. He wished Trat could see the other gestures he was making as he slid past, but knew he couldn't let them know he was there.

He had to hold back an angry retort as they continued to gossip.

He knew didn't have any moral high-ground, especially considering he was halfway through robbing them of their valuables, but he couldn't help feeling better about

himself.

As he crept away he heard confused shouting in another part of the caravan. It sounded like Felelor was back from his scare, but Ka'harja couldn't be completely sure that it wasn't a new guard he hadn't met, so he hurried forward. He tried to shake the gross conversation out of his head and distracted himself with their accents: they'd been speaking completely in International and had barely sounded foxen. He was shocked they'd not been mustenel or felinic or... anything other than foxen. Although, if they were heading to I'reka to trade with the avio they were probably going to Canis La'Can afterwards. The way they spoke *did* sound similar the snow-dwellers' accents....

'Again, Baku?'

A loud feminine voice cut through Ka'harja's thoughts and he instinctively hid behind the nearest caravan.

'I'd ask if you'd ever seen a boob before, but you do this every night!'

Ka'harja peered around the caravan and saw another set of guards, two more fit-looking foxens, this time dressed in chainmail and baring weapons.

The young man seemed to snap out of a trance and moved his eyes higher. 'Sorry, Koko, was I staring?'

'Of course you were, you stupid thing! Why are you men so horny all the time?' hissed Koko. 'Is it the night air? Does the cold probe your subconscious and turn on your greater animal instincts? Well, Baku? *Does it?*'

Ka'harja took advantage of their loud argument and moved to sneak past them. He was careful: the last thing he wanted was to be caught by a foxen woman already in a bad mood. Foxen women were dangerous when provoked and although this one — Koko — had a bow attached to her belt and arrows strapped to her back, Ka'harja was more afraid of the strong muscles he could see her tensing in her frustration at her companion.

'No, I look at you like this during the day, too,' Baku said, seemingly oblivious to himself.

'Oh, wonderful, because *that's* the reassurance I needed!' Koko's voice dripped with venom. 'I get enough of that from Lif and Trat! Sometimes I wish you'd all just fuck off back to the port Sken found you in!'

'I'll have a talk to the boys if you like. Let them know how much they bother you—'

'I can handle it myself!'

Baku apologised, sounding sincere, and turned away from his companion. 'I know you can look after yourself, but I'm always here to help you. With anything! You just have to ask. You know how much I love you.'

Her silence was a telling rejection.

Ka'harja actually felt sorry for Baku as he slipped by him.

Literally slipped. Ka'harja's heart lurched; he'd let himself become distracted and he'd fallen! He landed on the ground with a grunt and felt his blood run cold as Baku twitched his ears and looked around hastily.

'Did you hear that, Koko?'

Koko just snapped at Baku to leave her alone, which Ka'harja used to cover the sounds of him struggling to his feet.

‘No, Koko, I’m serious!’ ears erect, Baku stepped towards Ka’harja and looked around suspiciously. ‘I heard something.... Do you think it’s that ghost Naranako was talking about?’

Ka’harja felt his heart beating in his chest as Baku unhooked a long, leather bullwhip from his belt. He began to unravel it slowly and Ka’harja darted behind him.

It was hard for Ka’harja to breathe and he nearly threw up trying to swallow the lump in his throat. This foxen stranger was going to find him and whip him senseless! Ka’harja *really* didn’t like the thought of that.

Baku searched around the side of the caravan they were standing at as Ka’harja watched, but he jumped when Koko called out to him.

‘Baku get back here! There’s nothing out tonight besides the stars and clouds and two of the Goddess’ daughter moons!’

Ka’harja stuck out his tongue. *The Goddess’ daughter moons?* Oh eighth child, these people were *Animon!* Ka’harja couldn’t believe his bad luck. *Animon!* Of all religions to go for why would any self-respecting foxen choose to be a moon-worshipping *Animon!*

Obediently Baku retreated to Koko’s side and Ka’harja stood, not daring to breathe, in the arm’s length they’d left between them.

It took all of Ka’harja’s efforts not to panic. They didn’t know he was there.... *Oh Great Star his mother was right!* He never should have come here on his own! Even with the invisibility potion he was going to get caught!

His tail brushed Koko’s leg and he jumped forward, only to feel Baku’s tail flick him in the knee.

‘I promise to the Mighty Five if that touch was deliberate Baku I’ll—’

Baku took a step away. ‘No, sorry! I didn’t think I was that close! Won’t happen again.’

Koko grumbled and turned away again. She was *not* in a good mood.

Ka’harja felt his lungs aching as his rapid breaths matched his heartbeat. Barely thinking, but with an idea he couldn’t quite reach screaming in his mind, he faced Baku, lifted his open palm stiffly, and slapped the man’s left buttcheek.

Baku jumped in place and dropped his whip in the grass as Ka’harja quickly stepped out of the way.

There was complete silence as Baku turned to Koko.

‘That was different,’ he said.

‘What was different?’

‘You slapped me!’

Koko groaned. ‘No, I didn’t, you twit.’

‘You slapped me right on the arse!’

‘I did *nothing* of the sort!’ Koko rounded on Baku.

Baku just laughed. ‘You like me, I knew it! You like me as much as I like you! Admit it!’

‘Baku I swear to Scara I’m going to *kill you!*’

All Ka’harja heard as he sprinted behind the caravan was Baku’s high-pitched shout. He froze as Trat and Lif rushed passed him, shouting boisterously and obviously

ready to join in the fight, then continued to the centre of the caravan.

There was a mostly burnt out fire and a few sleeping rolls that had been dumped ungraciously onto the ground. Ka'harja wanted to kick himself. They were settling down to sleep and if he'd just been a little more patient the robbery would have been a whole lot easier! Now he had to deal with the caravaners *and* he was probably becoming opaque again!

Breathing heavily, he rushed through the open door of the closest caravan and began stuffing things into the invisible sack. He didn't really notice what half of the stuff was: he was too focused on jamming as much into the sack as he could.

'What in the name of the Three Moons?!'

Ka'harja froze. Like the idiot he was he'd forgotten to check if anyone was in the caravan and in his panic had just started blindly robbing the place. He whirled around and let out a quiet sigh when he realised the caravan's inhabitant hadn't been looking at the floating jar of red flowers and had actually been reading a very complicated-looking medical scroll.

'This can't be right,' the foxen dropped the scroll on the desk and rubbed his eyes. 'That would restrict the scapula too much.... Goddess, how do nurlak even survive like this?'

Quietly Ka'harja slipped the jar into the sack and, eyeing the tired-looking man suspiciously, backed out of the caravan.

That was it. Ka'harja decided he'd had enough excitement for one night and hurried away from the caravan. It wasn't hard to get past the guards as they cheered on the escalating brawl. Ka'harja managed to catch a glimpse of Koko clinging to Baku's back as he tried to shake her off. They both had smiles on their faces and looked like they were enjoying themselves far too much for what they were doing.

The last thing he heard as he sprinted away was a loud, angry shout that made the people cheering Koko's name fall silent.

Chapter End.

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