

Chapter 4: Glif 5th, Minda Year 10,053 AE (The Nigelle Farm; Okatako)

Ka'harja strut across the grassy field back towards his house. He was feeling extremely proud of himself. He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt this good! He was healthy, slightly richer, and completely naked. His mother was going to be so proud of him!

'And she thought I wouldn't be able to do it!'

He looked up at the sparkling sky and thanked the stars that the robbery went so well. He was almost tempted to thank the moons for it, thinking it would be ironic considering the people he'd stolen from worshipped them, but he shook his head.

That would be a little bit *too* disrespectful.

Ka'harja looked back up and saw two shooting stars falling side by side in the colourful night. Grinning, he took them as a sign of his good fortune as the two shining lights trailed across the sky. They shot to the horizon, growing larger as they fell, and Ka'harja watched as the shooting stars lit up in a yellow flash and illuminated the field as if the sun had suddenly risen.

Two figures were silhouetted in the distance and Ka'harja squinted to make them out as the strange light began to fade, only to be knocked off his feet by a sudden rush of air and loud *BOOM*.

Ka'harja felt numb. His ears were ringing and the rush of air had hit him like a stampeding hoard of dragons. He clambered to his feet but was knocked down again by the sound of a second boom that shook the ground with more force than the first. He lay on the grass for a moment and groaned as dirt thrown up from the sudden gust settled on him.

He felt like he'd been punched in the head. Twice. He could feel his heart beating in his chest painfully; feeling like his anxiety was trying to strangle him to death.

He tried not to panic. To stay calm.

Something's different, thought Ka'harja as he swallowed his fears. The night seemed darker than it had before. Were the stars a warning? *Was he in trouble?* He closed his eyes and groaned again. From who? The gods? *They don't exist!*

'NEG'AN!'

Ka'harja barely heard the shouting through the throbbing in his skull.

'Neg'an, are you alright? Neg'an stand up! We have to keep going! NEG'AN!'

Every movement was agony, but Ka'harja pulled himself to his feet and looked about for the source of the shouting. It wasn't any Empire accent he recognised and it certainly wasn't the caravaners....

He tried to shake the ringing out of his ears and ended up on the ground again, trembling with pain.

'IT HURTS! I CAN'T HEAR! IT HURTS!'

Ka'harja rolled over to look in the direction of the shouting. He saw the two figures

again. One of them was standing but the other seemed to be having trouble getting off the ground.

Ka'harja closed his eyes and shook his head. The ringing was starting to fade but his body still ached from the force of being knocked down.

Was that... a baby crying?

'MUP!' the voice cried again. 'MUP! MIITA!'

Suddenly it hit Ka'harja.

'Neg'an! Get up! Broja'kar! We have to go!'

Har'pies.

This wasn't good. This wasn't good at all!

What are they doing here?! Ka'harja couldn't do anything but watch as the pair staggered off in the direction of his house. Of course they go that way....

It took Ka'harja a long, long moment before he was able to get to his feet. He would have forgotten about the invisible sack if he hadn't tripped on it, but it reminded him it was there and so he quickly tied the end of it around his wrist so he'd not drop it again and began to painfully limp his way home.

He hoped he'd not meet the Har'pies on the way; hoped that they'd changed direction and headed back towards the Heck'ne. He just wanted to get home so he could curl up next to his mother and sleep away the pain, without having to deal with wastelanders.

But of course Ka'harja wasn't that lucky (he never was) and it wasn't long before he saw the Har'pies ambling across the field so slowly he could barely tell they were moving.

They didn't look very strong; more like injured slaves. They were as naked and dirty as he was, except that they were nurlak; with four arms each and pointed ears... it was much better than meeting Har'py warriors. Ka'harja dared to move closer and saw the nurlak had quite an age difference between them, though not how he would have guessed it— The shorter of the pair was the older one; her stocky build clearly showing some sort of growth disorder.

A mother and her daughter? Ka'harja guessed. Running away from Heck'ne....

The older Har'py moved in a determined manner. They were constantly glancing back and urging on the other, who was in obvious pain after the shock of the falling stars. The younger girl walked with a limp and stumbled several times before stopping and complaining loudly of being in pain. The first Har'py shushed her and obviously expected her to follow as they continued onwards.... Though she didn't.

Ka'harja decided to see how close he could get to the girl and calmly walked towards her. She didn't notice him as he stood at her side. She was too distracted by a bundle in her arms— A baby!

So he *had* heard a baby cry!

Ka'harja laughed out loud.

The girl jumped and looked up at Ka'harja. She stared at him for a short moment before a wide smile spread across her face and she began introducing herself. 'Abbtah! Mai'hai dankent Neg—'

'GET AWAY FROM HER!' the mother interrupted with a shriek. She forced her

way between Ka'harja and her daughter and gave a violent hiss. 'If you lay one hand on that berr I'll tear out your throat and shove it up your arse!'

Ka'harja laughed so hard he nearly cried. He knew he should take a Har'py's threat seriously, but he just couldn't. Not with the shocked, open-mouthed look of the daughter peering over the top of her mother.

'Calm down. Calm down,' Ka'harja laughed as he bent down to put his hand on the mother's shoulder. Though she was short it didn't feel unnatural to do; she was only a little bit taller than his own mother. 'My name's Ka'har—'

He was cut off abruptly by the Har'py's fist making contact with his nose. It was more painful than he was expecting and he ended up on the ground again.

'Don't touch me!' she hissed. 'I'll— I'll do more than just hit you next time!'

Ka'harja nodded and wiped the blood from his lip.

'*Kekik!*' the daughter gasped. '*Kekik!* Why did you hit him?'

Ka'harja recognised the Har'py word for *mother* and gave himself a mental pat on the back for being right about how they were related.

'What are you looking so happy about?' the Har'py stopped arguing with her daughter and turned to Ka'harja, letting out a throaty growl of displeasure.

'Just guessed something right,' Ka'harja shrugged, rubbing at his nose and flicking an ear casually. 'Don't worry about it.... Ugh, you have a good punch in you. Remind me not to bend down near you again.'

'You're... a *strange* man,' the mother's ears pressed down as she ushered her daughter back a step and gave Ka'harja a confused glance. Her eyes were tight with distrust and she let out a grunt that sounded more like a growl before sighing and letting her shoulders drop. 'What did you say your name was?'

'Ka'harja,' Ka'harja lifted himself from the ground for the umpteenth time that night and pointed to the sky. 'So how about those falling stars?'

The mother opened her mouth to speak but was interrupted by her daughter.

'They were scary!' she exclaimed. 'And they hurt a whole lot. I could barely get up after they knocked me down!'

'*I've never seen anything like it,*' the mother whispered. She looked at the sky and shuddered as if she were scared it would happen again.

It was an awkward moment of silence. Ka'harja looked at the two women and took the moment to examine them.

They weren't healthy. It looked like they hadn't eaten in days and Ka'harja could have easily counted their ribs. It was pathetic, really.... Not to mention the daughter had mucus and blood dripping down her leg. She looked like she'd only given birth a few hours ago! Then Ka'harja looked at the baby and realised that it *must* have been only a few hours ago. The baby still had its umbilical cord and hadn't been washed.

'Is that your first baby?' Ka'harja asked.

'Baby? Oh, you mean *berr*?' the daughter shook her head. 'Na. It's not my first berr. But it's the first one that's lived this long. All my other berr were born dead.'

Ka'harja wasn't exactly sure what to say to that. He saw the sad look on the girl's face as she stared down at her sick-looking child and felt a pang of sympathy for her. 'They're part *dassen*, I see?'

It wasn't hard to see the baby was half dassen. They were covered in birthmarks and had small dragon-like wings wrapped under their four little arms.

'Yi, that's why we're leaving,' the mother stepped in front of her daughter, her lip twitching as if she was considering baring her teeth. 'Our troop leaders don't like tia'fio. Uh— Mixed-bloods. Don't try to stop us!'

Ka'harja lifted his hands in a show of submission. 'I wouldn't dream of it.'

'That's settled then! So why not head back to wherever you dug yourself up and leave us be!' the mother turned her daughter away from Ka'harja and began to push her away. 'Come on, *we have to go.*'

The daughter struggled away from her mother and looked at Ka'harja. 'Can we stay with you tonight?'

'*Neg'an!*' the mother grabbed her daughter's free wrist and pulled her close. 'Don't ask such things!'

'Sure, why not?' Ka'harja laughed. He softened his voice and turned to the older woman. 'Listen, I know what you're going through. I left the Heck'ne too, a long time ago. I know how hard it is.... You're welcome to stay at my house tonight. It's warm and sheltered. And after—' he pointed at the sky and made a face. '—I think we all need a good rest.'

Neg'an hurried to Ka'harja's side as her mother glared, cold and hard.

'I don't trust you.'

'Listen, Mrs... uh,' Ka'harja stopped. 'What's your name?'

The Har'py shook her head. 'I'm not telling *you!*'

'Alright, can I call you Kekik, then?' the Har'py looked offended and it took all of Ka'harja's self-control not to start laughing again. 'If you don't give me your name, I'm going to call you Kekik.'

'I'm *not* giving you my name!' she hissed. 'And if you start calling me Kekik I'll—'

'Kekik it is, then!' Ka'harja interrupted as he put a hand on the Har'py's back and whispered in her ear so that Neg'an couldn't hear. '*Listen, Kekik, I'm trying to help you! It's freezing and your daughter looks like she's ready to collapse. My house is only a short walk away. I'm not going to force you to come, but I don't think you should spend the night out in the cold. Especially not with how sick that baby looks.*'

The Har'py closed her eyes and put her face in her hands. 'Fine. But if you try anything I'll—'

'Maim me? Heh. Yeah, I figured.'

Chapter End.

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