

## Chapter 5: Glif 6<sup>th</sup>, Grada Year 10,053 AE (The Nigelle Farm; Okatako)

Ka'harja couldn't help but laugh as the pair followed him through the fields. He'd been weaving his way carefully over the uneven landscape, glancing back frequently to make sure the girls hadn't fallen behind or tripped.

He wasn't surprised that Neg'an had gotten distracted as many times as she had; right now, she was staring up at the sky with her mouth wide open and her torn-up ears flicking back and forth.

'The sky looks like it's alive!' she breathed. 'Kekik, why are there so many stars here?'

'I... don't know,' her mother admitted. 'There's not so many clouds here, I suppose. The clouds hid the stars in Heck'ne.'

'Okay,' Neg'an nodded, seeming to accept the answer. Then she let out a long, wistful sigh and rubbed her eyes. 'Why are there so many clouds in Heck'ne? We haven't gone very far at all, but all the clouds are gone and the sky's all colourful and mip. Why's it like that?'

'I don't know.'

'I'll ask Ka'harja,' Neg'an decided out loud before hurrying to Ka'harja's side. 'Ka'harja? Can I ask a question?'

'You just did,' Ka'harja joked.

'Oh, did I?' for a moment, Neg'an blinked. Then she flicked an ear and readjusted her grip on her baby. 'Then I need to ask you another one. Do you know why there are so many clouds in Heck'ne?'

'Probably dust in the air,' Ka'harja told her. 'Though if you ask a religious freak you'd probably get told it's *Dark Sky*.'

'Dark Sky?' Neg'an echoed. 'Is that when the sky is dark? Does it have another name when it's not dark? And what's the sky being dark have to do with religion?'

Ka'harja snorted a laugh and scratched the back of his head. 'I don't know much about it, but some people think that a starless sky means there are no good spirits because evil ones have chased them all away. Basically, the sky goes dark and you get people who believe in the Goddess screaming and freaking out that they're going to die.'

'The Goddess?' Neg'an blinked. 'Do you mean Zen'efay?'

An itch crept over Ka'harja's scalp at the mention of the Har'py's god, and he shook his head. 'No. I mean Scara.'

Neg'an pulled a sour face and looked away. 'I've heard of her. She makes Heck'ne a wasteland because she hates us and wants us all to be unhappy and sick and die starving. She makes life bakti.'

'Wow. It's been a *long* time since I heard someone say that,' Ka'harja half-chuckled. 'Most Animon say she's the soul of the planet, and that the Heck'ne is a scar that she can't heal because Zen'efay rules it.'

‘Animon?’ Neg’an’s unhappy expression faded into curiosity, and her ears twitched. ‘What’s an Animon? Are they like a nurlak or a dassen or a foxen? Do they have wings? Or tails? Or big ears?’

‘Animon isn’t a race,’ Ka’harja laughed. ‘It’s a religion. Think of it like a... a reverse Har’py. They worship Scara and think Zen’efay is the evil one.’

‘Really?’ Neg’an frowned, though it wasn’t an angry frown; it was like she was so deep in a strange thought that it hurt. ‘Zen’efay. Scara. Reverse.... I suppose that makes sense. Because Zen’efay *did* tell Scara to put her head in her own hoourknah, didn’t she? So people who like Scara won’t like Zen’efay.... Yi! That makes sense.’

Ka’harja laughed so hard he choked on his own spit. ‘Yeah— When Zen’efay refused Scara’s light, Scara was pretty mad about it.’

‘Her light?’ Neg’an blinked curiously. ‘What light?’

Ka’harja shrugged. ‘Animon believe that when we die Scara gives us some glowing hair or something, and then we become stars.’

‘We become stars? I thought that when Scara got you, she dragged you into the planet and buried you in the deep dark Underfor and left you there.’

*Underfor*, Ka’harja shuddered at the word, pushing back the memory of how close he’d come to seeing it for himself. ‘That’s— That’s the Har’py version of it. In the Animon version, she takes the dead into the sky and turns them into stars.’

‘So.... Wait. The stars up there are dead people?’ Neg’an looked up, a horrified expression spreading across her face. ‘Dead people wrapped in glowing hair? That’s a lenta thought!’

‘Close your mouth,’ Ka’harja barked a laugh. ‘It’s supposedly a reward for being a good person in life— But don’t ask me for details. I’m not Animon, I don’t understand it either.’

‘You’re not an Animon?’ Neg’an cocked her head sideways and blinked several times. ‘Are you a Har’py too?’

‘No,’ Ka’harja shook his head. ‘Not anymore, anyway. I don’t believe in gods or goddesses or any of that rubbish. I’m an atheist. I don’t have a religion. The closest I’ve got to one is knowing about the Eight Star magics.’

‘*Eight Star magics?*’ Neg’an whispered, looking back to the sky. ‘Is that magic that comes from eight stars? *Which* stars? Can you point them out?’

Ka’harja groaned. ‘It’s magic from one star with eight points. The star was made by a family of gods. Blah blah blah. No big deal. Don’t worry about it.’

‘Hm.... Stars seem like they are very important things,’ said Neg’an. She walked beside Ka’harja quietly for a moment before continuing, ‘I would like to be important one day, too. But I don’t think I ever will be.’

‘I’m happy being a nobody,’ Ka’harja chuckled. ‘Nothing’s expected of you and you can get away with a lot more than you could if people knew who you were.’

‘Get away with things?’ Neg’an asked. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Like, uh... being a little bit rude,’ Ka’harja told her. ‘Eating too much. Not having a bath everyday—’

‘Bath?’ echoed Neg’an. ‘What’s a bath?’

‘When you clean dirt off yourself with water,’ said Ka’harja. ‘Sorry, shouldn’t have

assumed you'd know what that meant.'

For a moment, Neg'an was quiet. She looked around the ground and bit her lip and twitched her ears. Then she looked back to Ka'harja, her eyes sparkling, 'So why don't you have a religion? Do you not like gods?'

'I like the *idea* of them,' Ka'harja admitted. 'Like Scara? A deity who loves everyone and wants to protect them? That's great! I just... I don't know. It's hard to believe that something like that's real.'

'Scara loves everyone?' Neg'an gasped. 'Gighi, really? She really loves everyone? How is it possible to love *everyone*? Does she meet them all secretly? Does she shape-shift and pretend to be someone else so she can know everyone enough to love them? And do other things love everyone? Like grass! Does grass love everyone like Scara does?'

'Gr—' Ka'harja nearly choked. 'Grass? Why are you asking if *grass* loves everyone?'

'Because I like grass a whole lot?' Neg'an's voice rose a pitch, as if she couldn't understand how her thought wasn't as clear to Ka'harja as it was to herself. 'And I want to know if it likes me back. Why else would I ask a question like that?'

'Neg'an, leave him alone,' Neg'an's mother quickly grabbed one of her daughter's spare hands and tried to lead her away. 'Please, don't be mad at her. She doesn't understand.'

'No, it's alright,' laughing, Ka'harja bent down and ripped a handful of grass out of the ground. 'Grass can't feel hate. Unless you're allergic to it. Then it tries to kill you. But you don't have any bad red marks on your feet, so you're probably not allergic.'

Neg'an's eyes sparkled as Ka'harja threw the torn grass over her like confetti.

'So it— It loves me back!' she exclaimed. 'And it can be my friend?'

Her mother sighed at this and frowned. Her hard gaze met Ka'harja's eye and the corner of her lip twitched. 'I'm not explaining this to her again. You can fix what you've just done.'

Nervously, Ka'harja put a hand on Neg'an's back. He wasn't sure *what* he'd "just done," exactly, so he had no idea how to fix it. 'Grass... isn't.... It's not really alive—'

'But it can die?' Neg'an's voice was so firm it shocked Ka'harja into silence. 'And if it can die, then it's alive. If it's alive, it has feelings! And if it has feelings, it can be my friend.'

'I— Can't argue with logic like that,' Ka'harja coughed, and shrugged at Neg'an's mother. 'Sorry, Kekik.'

Neg'an looked at her frustrated mother for a moment before dropping to her knees and hugging the woman. 'Kekik, what's wrong?'

'Nothing, my little carrot, just... terr basaka tarr kami maka.'

What? She thought he was lying?

Excuse her?

**EXCUSE HER?!**

He was *not* a "maka"!

Well— Maybe he couldn't deny that he was a *bit* of a liar. *Sometimes*. But not *right now* he wasn't lying! He was trying to *help* her! Of all the ungrateful—

‘Dreankot!’ Ka’harja gave an offended scoff, watching Neg’an’s mother pale. ‘And I’ll say it again in International, too, just for good measure: *rude*. Kizza icha International. I speak Har’py, too.’

Neg’an looked between Ka’harja and her mother, then kissed her mother on the cheek and jumped back up to Ka’harja’s side. She stepped between Ka’harja and her mother, as if shielding her, and then blurted loudly (and perhaps with a tone a little more nervous than before): ‘If the stars are people, then what’s rain?’

‘*Rain?*’ Ka’harja echoed, so taken aback by Neg’an’s change in subject that he forgot he was annoyed. ‘Wh.... Rain is.... Rain is when the sky cries.’

The look Neg’an’s mother gave Ka’harja could have very easily killed him had Neg’an not turned around and gripped her excitedly.

‘I knew it! I knew it!’ she exclaimed. ‘That’s what I thought too! Everyone always said I was hakalika and that the sky didn’t cry! But you know it too! It must be true if we both think it!’

‘How far away did you say your home was?’ Neg’an’s mother looked like she’d had enough of Ka’harja to last a lifetime.

‘Just over that hill there,’ Ka’harja did feel a *little* bad about the grass—he hadn’t thought that Neg’an would take everything the way she did—but he wasn’t going to feel guilty for talking about why it rained. Instead he continued ahead, knowing his home was just over the slight rise; hidden well from anyone who’d never seen it before.

When Neg’an saw it she let out a shout, ‘*GIGHI!* WHAT IS THAT?! IT’S HUGE!’

‘That’s where I live,’ Ka’harja told her.

‘It’s like a giant hovel!’ she clapped her free hands and jumped up and down— But stopped herself when she nearly dropped her baby. ‘Oh, oh!’

‘Careful, carrot!’ her mother exclaimed, quickly taking her child from her and holding it firmly. ‘Don’t jump around. You’ll hurt yourself.’

‘But look at it!’ Neg’an breathed. ‘It’s so— It’s so— I *love* it! Kosson!’

Ka’harja laughed at that. ‘It’s pretty great, yeah! Come on, I’ll show you inside.’

‘We get to go *inside?*!’ Neg’an’s voice rose again, and she pulled on her long black hair in excitement. ‘Kekik! Kekik! We get to go inside!’

Neg’an’s mother gave a gentle nod and quietly followed Ka’harja down the hill. She didn’t say much as they made their way to the front door, though she let out a gasp as the warm air from inside flowed out and brought colour back to her pale cheeks.

Ka’harja chuckled before ducking inside. And then immediately let out a frustrated sigh.

Everything had fallen over.

It was absolute shambles.

Bottles had smashed, books were strewn across the floor, and the chairs were all sideways.... The only thing that *hadn’t* noticed the force of the quake from the fallen stars was Distro; who was about three meters away from the bed, still asleep on a pile of scrolls.

Pushing the idea of having to clean up to the back of his mind, Ka’harja guided the girls into the house and motioned to the floor, ‘Try not to step on anything.’

‘*Gighi*, it’s really messy in here!’ Neg’an pointed out, carefully taking her baby back

from her own mother. 'Is it always like this? Do you like this sort of mess? Can I make it messier or are you going to clean it up?'

Ka'harja shrugged and began to untie the invisible sack from his wrist. 'It's usually only the bottles that get everywhere,' he tried to put the sack of stolen goods down without the girls seeing, but Neg'an turned to him as he dropped it and he knew she'd seen it. He tried to act inconspicuous and motioned to the mess again. 'The rest is normally in piles.'

'Who's that?' Neg'an asked as her eyes fell on Distro. 'She doesn't look very comfortable. Why is she so pale? Is she sick?'

'That's my mum,' Ka'harja replied. 'My kekik. She's fine; I'll move her in a bit. Just leave her.'

The young nurlak continued to stare at Distro with the most intrigued look Ka'harja had ever seen. She crouched down next to his mother and reached out to touch her. 'She looks like the sky has fallen on her face!'

'I said to leave her!' without thinking, Ka'harja stepped to Neg'an's side and firmly gripped her wrist. 'I'll sort her out later!'

'NO! I'm sorry!' Neg'an ducked her head down and covered her face with her free arm. 'Please don't hit me! I'm sorry!'

Ka'harja let her go and stepped back, realising what he'd done. 'No, no! I wouldn't! It's okay! *It's okay!*' he glanced back and saw Neg'an's mother frozen in place. She looked as terrified as her daughter. 'I'm not like that. I'm sorry. Uh.... *Na... kiita. Na kiita. Kizza kiita.* I'm a good boy. *Kizza kiita.*'

'*Kizza kiita?*' slowly, Neg'an lowered her arm and met Ka'harja's eye. She was shivering and Ka'harja could tell by the twitching of her long, shredded ears that she was surprised. 'You're not going to hit me?'

'Of course not,' Ka'harja said simply. 'I want to help you. I shouldn't have snapped. I'm sorry.'

'You want to help me,' Neg'an repeated. There was a pause before she continued, 'Then help me know why your kekik looks like she has the sky on her.'

It took a second for Ka'harja to process what she'd asked. 'What do you mean?'

'Under her eyes,' Neg'an pointed. 'She has small dots, like stars.'

'They're called freckles,' he said. 'Haven't you ever seen someone with freckles before?'

'Nobody in our troop has them,' Neg'an's mother seemed to find herself and hurried to her daughter's side. 'And our troop doesn't socialise much with outsiders.'

'Well, you obviously did,' Ka'harja laughed and pointed to Neg'an's child. 'I've never ever, not once, heard of a dassen living in the Heck'ne! If you tell me that the dassen you bonked was a Har'py, I'll shave my tail and eat the fur!'

'What's "*bonked*"?' asked Neg'an.

'Nothing,' Ka'harja said. 'Don't worry about it.... Hey, I'll get some water for you so you can wash off, and get you something to eat. How's that sound?'

Neg'an's face lit up. 'Are you going to show me how to have a bath? I really want to know how! How cold is the water? Is it from a river or a pond or a puddle? Can I drink it?'

## **Chapter End.**

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