

Chapter 6: Glif 6th, Grada Year 10,053 AE (The Nigelle Farmhouse; Okatako)

Ka'harja woke up before Distro, as usual. And even though the older woman had been asleep for a good few hours more than she usually slept she continued to snore relentlessly beside her son and showed no signs of waking up any time soon.

But it didn't bother Ka'harja; it had been years since Distro had woken up on time. Plus, he'd given her that sleeping potion. And she'd been the one to make it; meaning it worked well. Probably better than she'd intended it to work. Her potions were usually like that.

He blinked as his tired eyes tried to adjust to the dull light of the morning. The room was illuminated yellow-white and everything was damp. Ka'harja groaned. He'd forgotten about the window his mother had broken and now the morning dew was soaking into their blanket.

The foxen boy had to be careful not to kick his mother as he stretched. The shared bed was cramped, but it was warmer than sleeping alone. Ka'harja thought back to the freezing nights he'd spent in a bedroll on Distro's floor before crawling under the blanket with her and asking, in the most pitiful voice he had been able to muster, if he could share his guardian's bed. He'd claimed to have had a nightmare but Distro had caught on to his lie and told him he was welcome to sleep next to her for the rest of the Snowfall months.... Somehow that three-month agreement had turned into eight years of sleeping back-to-back. Not that either of them minded.

Ka'harja shook himself and climbed out of bed. The chill air brought his thoughts back to reality and he checked to make sure he hadn't accidentally pulled the blanket off his mother. It was mostly covering her, but he still tucked the blanket around her properly, kissed her on the cheek, and stumbled to the kitchen.

He could tell something was going to be different about today, but he couldn't remember what had happened the night before. He ached like he'd had a party but all he remembered was pretending to be a ghost and slapping someone on the butt. He didn't remember who, though.

He was searching the kitchen desperately for something to eat and came across the bottle of Emperor's Orgasm that he had put away the night before. He didn't hesitate to uncork the bottle and drink half of it, justifying it as his breakfast. The last gulp was messy; he choked and coughed a mouthful of the drink onto the kitchen floor. He figured he'd had enough, then, and re-corked the bottle.

Not bothering to clean the spill, Ka'harja instead went to check the broken window. Though he frowned as he walked back through the house. Everything was an absolute mess! Did he *actually* have a party last night? He didn't think he would have had one. Even if he had wanted to, he had nobody to party with. And it would be obvious if his mother's friends had come over again. His aunt Denni would have been the one to wake him, if that were the case.... He stopped at the broken window and stared out across the grassy field.

Golden clouds were hanging low on the horizon of the faded blue-grey sky and everything looked normal, if not a bit shaken. Flying bugs shot about and Ka'harja could hear birds chirping in the distance.

Hm....

Was the well always on that angle?

Ka'harja cocked his head until the well stood straight in his vision.

No... no.... He didn't think that was right at all....

'Mip flakha syun.'

Ka'harja nearly jumped out of his skin at the voice behind him, and turned to see a young nurlak girl clutching a bundle of clothes. She looked familiar, but he couldn't place it.

'Uh.... Good morning to you too?' he managed. 'I'm sorry— Who are you?'

'You don't remember?' she said. *She looked tired.* 'You helped me and my kekik save my berr.'

Oh. Yes. He remembered now. 'You're Neg'an, right?'

'Not anymore!' she exclaimed excitedly. 'I'm changing it!'

'Ah. Well, if you're going to change your name now's as good a time as any,'

Ka'harja laughed as he turned back to the window. 'What are you gonna call yourself? And what's your kekik's name?'

'I'm going to call myself Stars,' she responded. 'Kekik is called Dena'cosa, but she prefers to be called Dena, without the cosa, like *her* kekik wanted her to be called.'

'I see,' Ka'harja said as he examined the girl. She was an oddity, even for a Har'py. There was something about her he just couldn't place and he tried to mentally list off her details to find out what it was.

She was wearing an old shirt of his, although it was backwards. He remembered ripping new holes into the clothes while the girls bathed so they could fit their four arms in comfortably. But he didn't remember Stars' hair being that long; it was almost down to her knees and seemed a darker, shinier black than it had been before. She seemed paler too, now that all the dirt and dried blood had been scrubbed off her face. Although her skin was still a sickly grey-beige that made her cheekbones seem even more prominent than they already were.

'And my berr is going to be called Little Demon,' Stars' happy addition interrupted Ka'harja's thoughts, and all he could do was laugh.

Little Demon! That's exactly what Har'pies would consider a mixed infant!

'What's funny about the name?' Stars twitched a damaged ear and Ka'harja had to force himself to stop snickering. 'It's what it is, and it's what I will call it! Don't be dreankot!'

'I'm sorry, it's just—' Ka'harja took a deep breath. 'It's different from the names we have here. So's the name "Stars," actually. Very different from what people here call themselves.'

'I don't mind being different,' Stars said. She flicked her head slightly and brushed her hair out of her eyes.

Ka'harja gasped. 'Oh, Great Star! You only have two eyes!'

The nurlak nodded. 'Yes.'

It took Ka'harja a second to compose himself. That was what had seemed so off about her! She only had two eyes instead of the four eyes that nurlak were usually born with. *How weird....*

'You look weird, too,' Stars spoke as if she'd read his mind. 'You're too tall for a foxen. You should only be this high.'

Ka'harja laughed as Stars held her hand to her hip.

'That's how tall all the foxens in my troop are,' she said simply. 'And that's how tall you should be. But you're not. You're as tall as my ears reach! Why is that?'

'I just am?' Ka'harja didn't feel like discussing it. Explaining the lingering effects of mis-measured potions to a non-chemist, let alone a *Har'py*, wasn't a very appealing conversation. So instead he tried to change the topic. 'So, uh, did you sleep well?'

'I didn't sleep at all,' Stars said.

'Why not?' Ka'harja asked. That was why she looked so tired! 'Was it too cold? I could have found another blanket for you if you'd asked.'

Stars shook her head. 'I was worried about my berr,' she said as she motioned to her baby. 'I wasn't sure when it would be hungry, or if its crying would wake me. It cries so quietly.... I didn't want to lose it like the others. It's the first one I've had long enough to name, and I really love it a lot. *Tirr kosson farfah berr. Yi. Farfah berr kami tai. Tarr kami taa'han.*'

Ka'harja's chest tightened as Stars looked down to her child and cooed her whisper: *I love my baby. Yes. My baby is alive. They are brave.*

How was he supposed to respond to something like that?

'I wasn't sure anyone would hear it if I slept,' Stars continued, looking back up to Ka'harja. 'So I didn't sleep. Although now I'm tired and my head hurts. *Miita.*'

'*Ouch, huh?*' Ka'harja echoed Stars in International. 'I'm sorry.... You could try and get some sleep now. Although you should have something to eat before you go back to bed.'

'Eat?' Stars looked surprised. 'But we only ate last night! Are you really going to give me *more* food?'

'Of course!' Ka'harja exclaimed. 'Eating every day is healthy, and it will help you make enough milk for your Little Demon.'

'Will it?' Stars asked. 'Gighi! Okay, I'll eat. But I'm not a very good hunter, so I can't help you catch it.'

'No need to catch anything!' Ka'harja said proudly as he led Stars to the kitchen. He dramatically pulled a sack of oats out of a cupboard. 'Bam! Porridge!'

'It looks like dust,' Stars observed. 'Does it taste like dust?'

'If you don't cook it, yeah,' Ka'harja laughed and continued pulling things out of the kitchen cupboards. 'Let me light the fire here and I'll cook it up and make it taste good! You like spiders?'

Stars stiffened. 'Oh, na! They're awful! Absolutely mup! And the big ones always attack us! Tah'liki got bitten once and his whole arm swelled up—'

'I meant for eating,' Ka'harja corrected himself. 'But I'll take that as "*oh, please don't add any into the porridge, I'd prefer if you put in apple slices!*"'

Stars giggled and agreed. 'Yi, Ka'harja.... Should I wait in here with you?' she asked.

'Why don't you go wake your kekik?' Ka'harja suggested as he put the porridge on the stove to cook. 'Give you both a good ten or so minutes to get yourselves ready to eat.'

Stars nodded enthusiastically and bolted out of the room. 'KEKIK! Ka'harja says we can bini kan!'

Ka'harja chuckled. He wouldn't expect someone from the Heck'ne to be this entertaining. Not in such a sweet way. She almost reminded Ka'harja of a kogarg boy he'd had a fling with a few years back... *that hadn't turned out too well*. He didn't want to think of it, so he grabbed the half-drunk bottle of Orgasm and downed the rest.

He wanted to mix it into the porridge like his mother would have done, but he didn't think it was a good idea to give alcohol to his guests. Not when they had an infant to feed.

'Ka'harja!' Stars rushed back into the room. 'Kekik's awake, but she doesn't want to come in and talk. I told her she should, but she said she doesn't like you much, so I told her she's just being silly and that you're great, and then she told me that I'm silly and trust too easy, and then she kissed me on the forehead and told me that I should keep you company and say thank you. Thank you, by the way! For the food and shelter and bath. You're kami mip!'

He was the best, wasn't he? Ka'harja grinned at Stars and left the porridge to simmer. 'You're welcome.'

Still smiling, Stars looked at the kitchen window. 'Can I look outside?'

'Sure!' Ka'harja watched as Stars hurried to the window and tried to lean out, only to bang her head on the glass. Ka'harja bit his lip and chuckled; he was distinctly reminded of one of his own experiences learning about the world outside the Heck'ne.

'What is this?' she asked as she touched the smudge her forehead had left on the otherwise clear window. 'It's like hard air.'

'That fooled me first time I saw it too!' Ka'harja laughed. He was lying a little; he hadn't understood what glass was for almost a full year after discovering it. 'It's called a window. The hard air is glass.'

Stars tilted her head to the side and flicked her ear innocently. 'Glass?'

'Yeah, glass.'

'Is it like grass? Its name sounds like grass.'

'No, it's... more like see-through rock,' Ka'harja laughed. 'But it's very easy to break, so don't lean on it or hit it!'

'What happens if it breaks?'

Ka'harja gave the porridge a stir and took it off the stove. 'It'll turn into tiny sharp rocks and bite you.'

It was hard not to laugh as Stars jumped back from the window. Her mouth was hanging open and her ears stood erect as she stared, wide-eyed and unblinking, at this now-dangerous beast that could attack at any time. She shielded her baby with all four of her arms, pressing it against her chest protectively.

'It will only bite you if you break it,' Ka'harja told her. 'You can still look out of it! Just don't touch it.'

Ka'harja could barely take his eyes off Stars as she crept carefully back to the

window and the first scoop of hot porridge ended up on the floor. He was more careful with the next few spoonfuls, which he scooped into a bowl and handed to Stars with a warning to be careful; it's hot.

Stars ate very slowly. She licked the porridge out of the bowl like a cat, smacking her lips with each lick and flicking her ears excitedly.

'Good, huh?' Ka'harja scooped some into a bowl for himself and stood next to Stars as she nodded happily. He decided to open the window a crack, as the steam from cooking was making it hard to see outside.

Stars watched him open the window with quiet amazement. She continued to stare outside for quite a while. There was a wistful look on her face as she started to speak. 'The sky is so kama here.'

'It is beautiful, isn't it?' Ka'harja agreed. 'Much better than in the Heck'ne.'

'You've been to the Heck'ne?' Stars turned her curious stare to Ka'harja. Then she smiled. 'Oh, yes! You said that yesterday.'

Ka'harja drank the thick porridge like soup. He wasn't fussed by how hot it was. He'd gotten used to burning sensations in his throat from drinking so many potions, and hot porridge was almost soothing compared to some of the mistakes he'd digested. He burped loudly and chucked the bowl next to the pot of porridge. He'd have seconds, of course. He always had seconds.

'Ka'harja?'

'Hm?' Ka'harja turned to Stars. 'What's up?'

Stars looked up at the roof before looking back to Ka'harja. 'I have a question.'

Ka'harja nodded and waited for her to ask. He was met with silence as Stars got distracted by a bug on the windowsill. A large black fly that buzzed unpleasantly was thinking about coming into the house. In the end, it decided not to and buzzed away, and Ka'harja continued to wait patiently until Stars turned back to him.

'You wanted to ask me a question?' Stars cocked her head.

Ka'harja barked a laugh. 'I thought that it was *you* with the question!'

'Oh, yes! It was,' Stars corrected. 'Did your kekik take you away from the Heck'ne, like I'm taking my berr?'

'What? Oh, no,' Ka'harja felt himself stand up straighter as he was put on the spot. 'Distro isn't my... she's not my *mother* mother. I'm an orphan.'

'But I thought that orphans were supposed to stay orphans,' Stars' voice became muffled as she started to lick the last of the porridge from the bottom of her bowl. 'Isn't it the law?'

'Not out here,' Ka'harja explained. 'Distro took me in and looked after me.'

'But wasn't it disrespectful to your honour?' Stars blinked. 'For her to think you couldn't look after yourself and to take you as her own?'

'It was my choice. I asked her for help,' Ka'harja said, simply. 'She gave me food and clothes and treated me like her own child, and that's what I became. Har'pies mightn't agree with it, but by Empire law I'm her son. And I like it that way.'

'Oh,' Stars rocked on the balls of her feet for a second and glanced down at her baby. 'So... she did what you're doing now for me and my berr?'

'Sort of,' Ka'harja grinned. 'Only I'm not going to become the adoptive father of

your child anytime soon!

Stars laughed and turned back to the window. 'That would be silly. It already has a yalfit!'

'What's his name?'

'I've told you its name!' Stars laughed again. 'Little Demon.'

He had to resist the urge to roll his eyes. 'I meant their father's name.'

'Its father's name?'

'Yes, their father's name,' Ka'harja grinned. He stepped around Stars so he could stand by her side to talk. He'd rather see her face than the back of her head. 'The dassen you fuck—'

Ka'harja didn't have the chance to finish his sentence as his foot slid out from underneath him. He reached out to grab something —anything— to stop himself from falling but just ended up knocking pots and pans off the bench, which landed on top of him as he smacked the back of his head on the hard stone floor. He smelt strong alcohol and sour apples as the wet puddle he had slipped in soaked into his tail fur.

He groaned; he hadn't meant to squeal when he fell but he was sure that loud shriek had been his.

'Are you alright?' Stars didn't seem too phased by Ka'harja's accident. There was concern on her face, but her voice was flat.

'*Fucking Orgasm*,' Ka'harja sobbed.

Stars gently put her baby down on the kitchen bench and started to move the pots off Ka'harja and onto the floor. 'That's an odd thing to happen after falling over.'

Ka'harja didn't bother explaining that the Emperor's Orgasm was a drink. Instead, he let her help him up and limped to the window. 'Day's getting warmer.'

'Is everything alright?' Stars' mother stuck her head into the kitchen. She glared at Ka'harja with such a vicious look that for a moment he was scared she was going to attack him... but then she softened her gaze and turned to her daughter. 'Carrot?'

'I'm okay, Kekik,' Stars told her. 'It's Ka'harja who got hurt.'

'Good,' Dena mumbled under her breath. She tensed when she realised Ka'harja had heard her, and retreated hurriedly out of the room.

'You look upset, Ka'harja,' Stars said simply. Then she seemed to realise what had been said and stared at Ka'harja with wide, scared eyes. Ka'harja raised a hand to comfort her but she flinched away. 'Please don't hit me!'

'I wasn't going to,' he slowly put his hand on her cheek. 'I was just going to put my hand here, like this.'

'Kekik does this sometimes,' Stars relaxed as Ka'harja stroked her face. She closed her eyes and let out a long breath. 'It's nice.'

Ka'harja pulled his hand away from Stars and turned to the window.

They watched as the sky turned from pale grey and bright yellow to vivid blue and shimmering white. Stars' breathing got heavier, and Ka'harja realised just how amazed she was by the sky's beauty.

'It looks like my kekik's eyes!' Stars said wistfully.

Ka'harja grinned. 'Your eyes look like that, too.'

'*Really?*' Stars exclaimed. 'But the sky's so kama! So beautiful! My eyes can't be

that colour.'

'Are you joking? You're gorgeous!' as he stared into her eyes, Ka'harja couldn't help thinking to himself that he knew Stars from somewhere. That they'd met before... but he just couldn't seem to place it.

She must have been someone he'd known before he left Heck'ne; but she can't have been anyone he knew too well if he didn't remember her by name or face.

Or maybe it was just his brain forgetting everything, again....

Stars blushed and looked to the floor. 'I'm sorry, we can't be myits.'

'Whoa, no,' Ka'harja took a step back. 'That's not what I was trying to— No. Na.'

Stars looked confused. Her cheeks were still red and she mumbled when she spoke. 'But you're being so nice to me... and complimenting me. And you think I am kama.'

'That doesn't mean I'm flirting with you,' Ka'harja explained. 'Look, I don't like girls. I'm gay. *Gay*. Boys only for me. Bal'hiki kata.'

'But why else would you compliment someone, if you don't want to have sex with them?'

Ka'harja shrugged. 'Because you notice something nice about someone and think it would make them happy to hear?'

'But if you're "*gay*," then how can you tell if a girl has something nice about them?'

'I'm not fucking blind, that's how!'

Stars flinched, and Ka'harja felt bad for snapping.

He let out a sigh and rubbed his forehead. 'Not everything revolves around sex,' he said simply. He couldn't help but think about the irony that it was him, a foxen man, dismissing sex... considering the stereotypes. 'Sometimes being friends is better.'

'Oh... I like how that sounds,' Stars said slowly. Then she grinned, and her ears flicked up. 'What kind of men do you like to be myits with?'

'I don't know,' Ka'harja shrugged. 'Short?'

'Then you can have the men I don't want!' Stars decided, her cheerful optimism coming back in a rush as she clapped her hands.

Ka'harja laughed. Why not humour her? 'It's a deal.'

They stood together for a while, quietly thinking. Ka'harja chuckled when he saw she'd picked up her baby again. She was holding Little Demon with her lower arms and gently stroking them with one of her free hands.

'I like that it doesn't smell like dust here,' Stars peered out the window again and pointed. 'I can still smell the dirt, but it doesn't smell burnt.'

'It's nice,' he agreed.

Stars took a deep breath and kissed her baby. 'Can you help me feed my Little Demon? I don't know how to with this thing on.'

'Sure.'

Ka'harja helped Stars adjust her backwards shirt so that she could feed Demon comfortably, then turned back to the window. Partly to be polite, but mostly because he didn't want to see it.

He waited a while, but the silence felt awkward, so he tried to think of something to say.

'What's your preference?' Ka'harja finally asked. 'Dominant hand, I mean. I'm

ambidextrous.'

'Ambi... huh?'

'I use both my hands for things,' he clarified, glancing back at her and feeling relief when he saw that she'd stopped feeding Little Demon. 'Nurlak have lower and upper arm preferences, right? Which do you use?'

Stars stared at Ka'harja, confused, for what felt like a full minute before she lifted her upper hands up and looked at them. Her eyes grew wide and her mouth opened in shock. 'I use my top arms.'

Ka'harja lost it at that. He laughed so hard he had to sit down on the kitchen floor again. His chest and stomach hurt and he couldn't breathe.

The whole time he laughed Stars watched him. She was frowning and looked offended, but Ka'harja couldn't stop himself.

Her face!

'Don't laugh at me!' Stars exclaimed as she stomped a foot angrily and folded back her ears. 'I'm tired of being laughed at! I don't want people to laugh at me anymore! Stop it right now! Broja'kar! *He'hen!*'

The hurt in her voice was all Ka'harja needed to hear. He stopped laughing and scrambled to his feet. 'Sorry,' he held out a hand to Stars. 'Friends?'

She hesitated, staring at him as her ears flicked back up and her voice came out in a mystified gasp. 'Are we friends?'

'Sure,' Ka'harja grinned. 'If you want to be.'

Her face lit up and she bolted out of the room. 'Kekik! I made a friend!'

'With who?' Ka'harja heard Dena respond through the wall. 'I hope it wasn't with *that boy!*'

Ka'harja frowned as he collected the bowls and lifted up the heavy pot of porridge. He made his way into the main room as Stars began twirling around her mother excitedly.

'It was! It was! My first friend outside of Heck'ne!'

'Well, I suppose we have to start *somewhere*,' Dena mumbled. She clenched her jaw when she saw Ka'harja was in the room and looked away awkwardly.

Ka'harja tried not to let it bother him. He put the pot on the table with a grunt and started filling bowls. 'Do you want more, Stars?'

'*More?!?*' Stars almost shouted. 'Gighi! I'm allowed even *more?!?*'

'You can have as much as you like,' Ka'harja told her. 'Don't worry about it. I'll make more if you manage to empty the pot.'

Stars bounced up and down excitedly. 'More! More! I want more! Broja'nikar!'

'Don't eat too much, my pebble,' Dena reminded her. 'You're not used to eating a lot. I don't want you making yourself sick. Kan slowly.'

'Same goes for you, Kekik,' Ka'harja laughed as he sat opposite the girls. 'I mean, the eat as much as you want thing, not the don't make yourself sick thing. Though you shouldn't do that either.'

Dena gave a disgruntled *tsk* and turned her back on Ka'harja so she could continue to fuss over her daughter.

Ridiculous, Ka'harja rolled his eyes. He tried not to be offended, but it was hard; it

wasn't like he'd risked his life to give her, a *potential murderer*, food and shelter or anything like that! Ungrateful....

Stars was finished with her second bowl by the time Ka'harja managed to stop himself internally mocking Dena, who handed her daughter what was left of her own porridge.

'Your kekik's been asleep a long time,' Stars said as she finished off her mother's bowl. 'She's a very loud sleeper, and she snores like my gorg growls when he's angry. Although I shouldn't call him gorg. He hates it when I do and growls at me whenever he hears me say it, which I do a lot without thinking, so I hear him growl a lot. That's how I know your kekik sounds like him. He only likes it when I call him by his name, which is Lah'kort, or if I call him yalfit. That means father, if you didn't know. Although you probably did, because you knew what kekik meant. But if you didn't know before you know now, because I just told you and—'

Ka'harja nodded along patiently while Stars continued to talk— Though nothing she said really made any sense to him. He wasn't sure whether it was appropriate to smile; Dena was watching her daughter with a severe expression and flinched every time Stars said the name "Lah'kort."

'What's the not-Har'py word for gorg? I never learnt that one.'

'Brother,' Ka'harja told her. He realised a few seconds after saying it out loud that she'd referred to Lah'kort as both yalfit and gorg, and his eyes flicked to Dena. *Her own son?*

Dena looked at him and nodded, with sad eyes that begged him not to ask about it. Ka'harja shivered as he thought about what might have happened to him if he'd stayed in the Heck'ne with his biological mother. He certainly wasn't hunter material.... Would he have ended up like Dena?

The thought made him ill.

Luckily for them both, Stars changed the topic back to Distro's snoring which —as awkward a topic as it was— was a lot less awkward than Har'py family dynamics.

'*My kekik* doesn't sound like yours when she sleeps,' Stars said proudly. '*My kekik* is a very quiet sleeper. Well, actually, she's quiet all the time. People can forget she's there because she barely ever talks! But I never forget her, though. I love her too much. Kossou.'

Dena gave a weak smile and kissed her daughter's cheek.

'So she's the opposite of you, then?' Ka'harja pushed his anxiety to the very back of his mind and smiled at Stars. 'With the never talking thing, I mean. You never seem to close your mouth!'

Stars stiffened, looking to the floor as she started to apologise, but then she stopped halfway through. 'Wait— You were smiling when you said that. Was it a joke?'

Ka'harja nodded. 'Of course it was. I don't insult my friends and actually *mean* it.'

'And *I'm* your friend!' Stars' eyes grew wide as if she had just remembered. Then she paused. 'Do you think our kekiks can be friends?'

'You know I don't like having friends,' Dena squeezed Stars' shoulders gently before adding, 'Besides you of course, my little carrot.'

'But you can make better friends now that we're free!' Stars exclaimed. 'Just like I

am!

'That's enough for now, my precious one.'

'But kekik—'

'I said that's enough!' Dena's snap was followed by a tense silence. A moment passed before she sighed and kissed Stars on the forehead. 'I'm supposed to be the one looking after you. I don't want you worrying about me.'

'But I love you, Kekik,' a tear rolled down Stars' cheek and Ka'harja couldn't help feeling sorry for her.

Without thinking, he jumped out of his seat. 'You know what? This conversation is so awkward that I think waking my mother and explaining to her that I welcomed two Har'pies into my home while on a potion high is more appealing than sitting here and listening to it! So I will be right back!'

He turned around stiffly and marched towards the bed. He didn't bother to avoid the junk that had been thrown about the house the night before and simply kicked it away as he walked. When he got to the bed he plopped himself down heavily and gave his mother a shake, which she ignored.

'Mum, time to get up,' he shook her again. 'Mum, it's time to get up. Sunlight and breakfast await you. Time to get up! Wake up! Awaken!'

She didn't respond at all.

'WAKE UP!' Ka'harja shouted. But to no avail. Getting his mother up for breakfast was one of the hardest daily chores he'd ever been given. He might as well tip porridge on a brick. 'DISTRO NIGELLE! WAKE THE FUCK UP! MUM! DISTRO! MUM!'

She snorted and mumbled something before rolling over and burying her face in her pillow.

Frustrated, Ka'harja climbed over her onto the other side of the bed and squashed himself between the wall and his mother. He braced himself, setting his feet against Distro and his back against the wall, and then heaved his legs straight.

His mother fell out of bed with a grunt, a *thunk*, and a mumbled "fuck off," but when Ka'harja checked on her she was still asleep.

'Impressive,' Dena chuckled. 'Is she alright?'

'Yeah, she's fine. It's all part of our daily routine!' Ka'harja grinned as he picked up one of Distro's abandoned bottles. 'This happens every morning!'

He waved the top of the bottle under Distro's nose and finally got a response out of her. She made a loud, wet snorting sound and attempted to sit up.

'Ka'harja? I have a headache,' she snorted again, this time from deep in her crackly chest. She opened her eyes, only to immediately close them again. 'Oh by the ninth god that's bright.'

Ka'harja chuckled as she gave a long wet sniff. 'Is that our new language now?'

'Yeah, it's hangover for hello,' she sniffed again and blinked her eyes slowly. 'Aren't you handsome today?'

'I'm handsome every day,' Ka'harja reminded her playfully. 'I'm sure our new guests would agree.'

'Guests?' Distro wiped her nose with her arm and gazed around with her swollen, half-open eyes. 'Who are they? They're not— IT'S NOT THE TRADERS IS IT?!'

Ka'harja put his arm around his mother as she curled into a ball, clutching her head and obviously regretting yelling with such a bad hangover.

'No, no, not the caravaners,' Ka'harja explained. He helped his mother to her feet and guided her to the table. 'They're like me.'

Distro stared blankly at the girls as Ka'harja sat her down. Dena looked nervous, but Stars started bouncing up and down excitedly when Distro's eyes met hers.

'They're nothing like you,' Distro said. 'They're too pale. And thin. And they're both girls. They look like— Oh. *Runaways?*'

Ka'harja nodded.

'Abbttoh! I'm Stars!' obviously unable to control herself any longer, Stars jumped onto the table and sat in front of Distro. 'I used to have a different name, but now my name is Stars because Ka'harja told me about the stars and the sky and grass and I really like them all but I really like stars a lot! Do you know about Scara? There are people called Animon who think she's a goddess with glowing hair and magical love! And did you know Har'pies say she's evil when Animon say she's not and is really good and full of love? I'm so excited to not be a Har'py anymore! Ka'harja's helping me to stop being one because he used to be one too but stopped so he knows how to stop being a Har'py and he's been telling me how and did you know he can speak Har'py? Can you speak Har'py too?'

Distro stared at Stars with eyes wider than Ka'harja had seen in a while. Her eyebrows were raised high and she didn't look like she was taking anything in.... Ka'harja supposed it didn't help that Stars started speaking in Har'py to test if Distro could understand her.

Ka'harja was grinning ear-to-ear as his mother stared at Stars. He served himself a bowl and finished it before Stars realised Distro *couldn't* speak Har'py and started to talk in International again. Then he turned and started for the front door.

'Ka'harja, don't be rude!' his mother called to him. She sounded more desperate and confused than she did frustrated. 'Get back here and eat your breakfast— Don't just walk away! *Ka'harja please come back I don't know what's happening!*'

Ka'harja didn't stop; he just ignored his mother's protests and hurried outside. He stretched, laughed, then made a beeline for the outhouse.

Chapter End.

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