

Chapter 7: Glif 6th, Grada Year 10,053 AE (The Nigelle Farmhouse; Okatako)

By the time Ka'harja got back in the house Distro and Dena were sitting side by side, laughing and having a discussion about "how utterly useless men can be."

'I resent that,' Ka'harja grunted as he came up behind his mother. He kissed the back of her head and reached across the table for more food.

Dena's attitude changed when she realised Ka'harja was in the room. She shuffled nervously and went quiet when Distro tried to start the conversation again. Instead, she stared at Little Demon, who slept peacefully in her arms.

'What's wrong? Are you alright?' Ka'harja asked. He knew that *he* was what was wrong but was trying to be reassuring. 'Can I get you a drink?'

'Yes!' Distro interrupted. 'Check if we have any White Dragon Wine left would you, Sweetheart? If not just grab some more Melberry. That stuff's cheap as water.'

'It basically *is* water,' Ka'harja snickered as he stepped over bottles and obediently made his way to the kitchen. He nearly collided with Stars on his way in, who lifted up armfuls of food and exclaimed happily that Distro was going to let her try everything in the kitchen.

Ka'harja squeezed past her and started shuffling through the cupboards as she rambled on about how nice the food they had tasted. He didn't manage to find White Dragon *or* Melberry, but he found quite a few bottles of a drink called "Filgigosh" pushed right to the back of one of the higher cupboards, which he figured must have been one of the bottles nicked from the travelling caravan. The label wasn't in International; it was some sort of chunky cursive that he didn't recognise (though, he thought he had seen it before). He opened it and had a sip as Stars wandered up to his side.

It had a very strong mint flavour with a nutty aftertaste. It was, in Ka'harja's opinion, disgusting... and oddly chunky.

'Can I try that, too?' Stars asked.

'Sorry, not good when you're breast feeding,' Ka'harja pulled the bottle away from her quick, curious hands. 'If you drink this your milk might make Little Demon sick.'

Stars gasped loudly and ran out of the room. She dropped a loaf of bread on her way out so Ka'harja picked it up and followed her to the table (which she proceeded to sit on top of) and gently *thwapped* her on the head with it.

'Bread head,' Ka'harja chuckled. Stars was obviously confused, so he continued, 'This is called bread. I bopped you on the head with it. So you are now a bread head.'

'Don't confuse the poor girl,' Distro punched Ka'harja's arm. 'And give me my drink!'

'Alright, but don't overdo it like yesterday!' Ka'harja held the bottle out to his mother... but pulled it away when she reached for it. He did this several times, each time having to pull it away faster, before Distro managed to catch it. He still didn't let go and

watched his mother struggle to pull the bottle away from him. She gave a victorious laugh when she won the tug-of-war and drunk without looking at the bottle. She gagged and spat it out almost as soon as the drink made contact with her lips.

'What the fuck is this?' Distro snapped. She stared at the label and then frowned. 'Filgigosh? This is cooking oil, Ka'harja!'

'Is it?' Ka'harja laughed. 'Sorry, I couldn't read the label and sort of just assumed any liquid in the house was alcohol.'

'It's fourteen years past its expiry date!' Distro cackled and handed it back. 'It must have been something my father made me take when I left home. Where in the world did you find it?'

'It was in the back of one of the top cupboards,' Ka'harja answered. He turned to Stars and held out the bottle. 'Hey Stars, turns out it won't make Little Demon sick if you drink it.'

'Don't drink it!' Distro slapped the bottle out of Ka'harja's hand before Stars could take it. 'It's gone bad! It'll make *you* sick!'

Stars looked hurt. 'Ka'harja, why would you want to make me sick?'

'Don't worry, hon, he doesn't *want* to make you sick,' Distro stared at the bottle as thick, chunky liquid pooled onto the floor. 'He's just an idiot who can't think things through.'

'That's putting it lightly,' Dena mumbled. She froze when everyone turned to her. 'Did I... say that out loud?'

'What have you got against me?' Ka'harja snapped and pointed a finger at Dena. 'No! Seriously? All I've done is try to *help* you!'

Dena refused to meet his eye. 'I... I don't know. I'm sorry. Please don't.... Don't hit me.'

'I'm not going to hit you,' Ka'harja's chest tightened with a knot of frustration and he put his hand down slowly. He tried to remind himself to be patient.

'Dena, sit down and finish your breakfast,' Distro's voice sounded like it had been dragged across a gravel road. 'Ka'harja, please get me a drink. An actual drink. Listen to me! I sound a dying gargoyle!'

'Alright, I'll get you a drink,' Ka'harja said.

'And then clean up the mess you've made!'

Ka'harja got Distro her drink and then headed back into the kitchen. He didn't feel up to dealing with tense conversation as he cleaned the spilt oil, so he sat against the wall and put his face on his knees. He sighed when he heard Stars start talking.

'You rasp like I used to,' Stars said, presumably to Distro. 'When I was a just a berr, if it got cold, my throat used to swell up and I couldn't breathe properly. I sounded just like you do! I still sound a little like that when I get thirsty, though, but not as mup as it used to be. And I used to know someone else who talked really funny, but he's gone now. He left a long long time ago and I can't remember his face anymore. He made me happy, and I wanted to be his friend. My yalfit was going to give me to him when he was old enough to want me as a myit, because he was the son of a really strong warrior that Lah'kort wanted to impress, but then he ran away, so Lah'kort kept me for himself—'

'Carrot, that's enough. Please talk about something else. *Anything else.*'

'Oh— Okay...' Stars sounded hurt. 'Mm.... What's that rainbow on the wall? It is bal'hiki to a star. Uh, I mean... it *looks like* a star.'

'That? That's the Eight Star,' Distro explained. 'It's a religion thing. Each section of the Eight Star is supposed to represent a different magic and god. It's complicated.'

'*That's a lot of gods,*' whispered Stars. Ka'harja had to strain to hear her. 'Do they really exist?'

'HAH! No,' Distro laughed. Then she gave a cough and corrected herself. 'Not that I think, anyway. Gods just don't make sense to me.'

'They don't? I think they make sense,' said Stars. 'They make me feel... safer. I think. I'm not sure what words to use for the feeling they give me. Like everything going bad can be made good again. Even if it takes a long long time. Mup turning to mip.

Ka'harja sighed as his mother chuckled.

'Don't laugh at me!' Stars exclaimed.

Distro went quiet and Ka'harja strained to hear the hushed conversation. He thought he heard someone apologise but he wasn't sure.

'Well, to me, *magic* makes sense,' Distro said suddenly. 'Magic is always there; always has been and always will be. Even long after our kinds are gone, magic will still exist.'

'Our leader says that magic was made by Scara, and that it's mup and we shouldn't use it,' said Stars. 'But I'm not sure what to think anymore. What do you think? Is magic mup?'

'I think it's just like anything else that exists in the world' Distro answered. 'Like a rock, or a stick. Neither of those things are going to jump up and start beating you by themselves; it's about what the people who pick them up choose to use them for. They can use them to hit you, or to build a house. It's not the rock or the stick's fault if it's used for hitting. It's the person who uses it for hitting who's bad, not the object.'

This was followed by another silence.

'I think I like the Eight Star,' Stars finally said. 'It's very pretty. I like how this picture of it uses real rocks to make it sparkle.'

Distro laughed. 'Ka'harja made it for me.'

'I like Ka'harja, too,' Stars said happily. 'And I really like you too, Kekik Distro. Can we live with you?'

Distro laughed loudly. 'I don't think that's a good idea.'

'Why not?'

'Carrot...' Dena hesitated, then sighed. 'We're still too close to the border. We have to get as far away from the Heck'ne as we can. All the way away.'

'That sounds like a very long walk. And I don't think I can walk much further.'

'Maybe. But maybe you won't have to,' Distro paused; probably to take a swig of her drink. 'There's a travelling caravan hanging around. You could ask if they'd take you with them to wherever they're heading. I'm sure they'd be more than happy to help you!'

Ka'harja scoffed. After what he'd seen of the caravan, he wasn't sure it was a good idea to leave Stars with them. Not with Trat, at least. Baku seemed decent enough, but the others....

‘What if they don’t take us, Distro?’ Dena sounded close to tears. ‘What do we do then? We can’t stay here.’

‘If they won’t take you, I’ll offer them money. If that doesn’t work we wait for another caravan to come through. There’s some good friends of mine who come through every six or so months to give us mail and sell on my potion stock. They’ll be coming by again soon, and they’d take you if I asked them to, but... getting you away from here as soon as possible would be best. Ka’harja can take you to the caravan when he STOPS EAVESDROPPING FROM THE KITCHEN AND GETS HIS BUTT IN HERE!’

Ka’harja jumped into the kitchen doorway. ‘Great Star, Mum! You can’t expect me to go back to the caravan after what happened last night!’

Dena squinted and locked her four eyes on Ka’harja with a severe expression. ‘What happened last night?’

‘Uh— No, nothing happened,’ Ka’harja lied. ‘I meant after last night being such a long night. And me being tired from not sleeping well!’

Dena turned away. She obviously wasn’t convinced by Ka’harja’s lame excuse.

‘You’re a really bad liar,’ Stars piped up. ‘I know you’re telling a maka. You slept as good as your kekik did. Why don’t you want to go to the caravan? Is it an animal? Is it dangerous? I won’t go to it if it’s dangerous! It might hurt my Little Demon!’

Distro put a hand on Stars’ knee —the only part of Stars she could reach while she was sitting on the table— and tried to comfort her. ‘It’s not an animal, it’s just a couple of nomadic secas and their guards.’

‘Nomadic secas?’ Stars cocked her head and twitched an ear. ‘I know what secas are, but what is nomadic? Is it a religion like Animon?’

Ka’harja shook his head. ‘It’s just a word used to describe someone who travels around a lot.’

Stars seemed to think for a moment before a huge grin spread across her face. ‘Like I’m going to be!’

‘You could become a nomad, I suppose,’ Distro’s eyes darted from Stars to Dena and back. ‘But I wouldn’t recommend travelling alone. There are lots of people out there who might hurt you.’

‘Of course there are!’ Stars exclaimed. ‘That’s why we’re running away. I don’t think many people can be as mean as Lah’kort, though. So even if I meet someone who wants to hurt me, they won’t do a very good job. Because I’m used to being hurt really bad, and nobody can hurt people as bad as Lah’kort can, and Lah’kort was the one hurting me. So if someone tries to hurt me it won’t be a big deal.’

‘You’re probably right,’ Ka’harja heaved himself onto the table so he could sit next to Stars. ‘But you being able to cope with pain isn’t an excuse for people to hurt you.’

‘I know, and it’s okay,’ Stars pet Ka’harja on the shoulder and grinned. ‘If someone tries to hurt me or my Little Demon, I’ll just kill them.’

‘What a *simple* solution,’ Distro crackled. She coughed a laugh and then turned to Dena. ‘Have either of you ever killed anyone before?’

‘Yi,’ said Dena.

‘Na,’ said Stars.

‘Yikes,’ said Ka’harja. ‘Remind me not to get on your bad side, Kekik.’

'I think you're already on her bad side,' Distro cackled loudly. 'Alright. Let's start packing and get you to the caravan.'

'Packing?' Stars echoed curiously. 'What are we packing? We can't take this place with us like our troop usually does when we move, it's too big and solid. We could never fold it up like our sleeping hovels in the Heck'ne.'

'We're going to give you some clothes,' Ka'harja told her gently. 'You'd fit in most of my old stuff, if I cut arm holes in it like the shirt you're wearing now.'

'But I already have clothes,' Stars pulled on her shirt happily. 'You gave me these!' 'You're going to need to wash them,' Ka'harja told her. 'You can't wear them while they're wet, and you can't just walk around naked.'

'I walk around naked all the time,' Stars stared at Ka'harja with a confused look and flicked one of her ears.

Same, thought Ka'harja, though he kept that to himself. 'It's impolite to be naked when you're with strangers. So if you're going to be leaving with the caravaners you're going to want a second set of clothes.'

'You're being very nice to me,' Stars smiled. 'I'm not used to people being nice to me.'

'Well, *get* used to it!' Ka'harja met Stars' eyes and grinned. He'd only known Stars for a day—less than— but she'd already become closer to him than people he'd known for years.... Although, to be fair, the people he'd known for years were his mother's friends and clients; mostly people he wouldn't have chosen to be social with. As much as he cared for some of them, they were his mother's friends, not his.

'Ka'harja, I have a question,' Stars shifted in place nervously. 'I don't want to upset you by asking, but you said....'

'Go on,' Ka'harja gave her a gentle shove as she trailed off. 'I won't get upset. What did I say?'

'You said it's rude to walk around naked, but when we first met, you were naked... and now, you're barely wearing anything. All you have on is those.'

Ka'harja glanced down at his tattered shorts and chuckled. 'This is what I usually wear around the house,' he explained. 'But I could put on a shirt if you'd like.'

'I don't mind, but what about when we first met? You said it was rude to be naked around strangers, but when we first met we were strangers, and you were naked.'

'Well I wasn't expecting to meet anyone, was I?' Ka'harja gave a nervous laugh. He couldn't explain the *actual* reason he'd been naked. 'And—'

'Here you go!' Distro exclaimed from the kitchen doorway.

Distro's shout had cut Ka'harja off and he stared at her, wondering when she'd gotten out of her chair.

Two large shoulder bags were slung over Distro's shoulders as she stumbled into the room. 'Food, water, clothes, money, and sleeping potions. That should be all you need.'

'Sleeping potions?' Dena commented. 'What are those for?'

'Sleeping,' Ka'harja snickered. He stopped when Distro glared at him.

'I've never met a runaway who didn't have nightmares,' Distro said gently. 'The potions should help you both sleep easier. Just a mouthful before you lie down and you

should be fine. I'm sorry I can't give you more. *Someone* recently raided my pantry and used up all my stock.'

Ka'harja gave a cough and looked away from his mother; realising she hadn't forgotten how he'd escaped the night before. As he did, Stars smiled widely and took her bag from Distro.

'This is more than I've ever been given in my *entire life!* Thank you!'

'You should both get going before the caravan leaves,' said Distro, fiddling with her ear.

Ka'harja grinned when he saw she was wearing the earring he'd given her. It was like the necklace she'd given him; with a cutting of his hair attached so they'd never feel alone—

'Ka'harja will take you now, won't you, Sweetheart?'

His grin disappeared and anxiety gripped his chest like sharp talons squeezing a mouse. 'Yeah, sure.'

Chapter End.

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