

Chapter 8: Glif 6th, Grada Year 10,053 AE (The Nigelle Farm; Okatako)

The air outside was a lot warmer than the night before, though it was still cold. Flying bugs narrowly avoided eyes and crickets chirped somewhere in the damp grass as Ka'harja and the girls made their way across the field.

They were going a different way than Ka'harja had gone before; it was a little longer but it avoided the Heck'ne border completely, which made everyone much happier.

'The Har'py religion is something else,' Ka'harja flicked the morning's dew from his tail. 'I'll never get over the fact that it's named after the harpy race that started it. They could have called it anything else; but no. They had to make things confusing for the rest of us.'

'I know!' Stars exclaimed as she chased the bugs that rose from the grass. 'It's so hard to tell which one people are talking about! You can think they're talking about the religion and think that you're going hunting with another nurlak, and then you get actual harpies with sharp feet and teeth and wings that take your food and call you hakalika, and it's stupid and it sucks! Mup mup.'

'Calm down, carrot,' Dena caught her daughter as she ran past. 'You're going to upset the baby running around like that, let me hold them.'

Stars' paused, her entire demeanour changing as she gently passed her baby over to Dena. She kissed Little Demon on the nose, checked that they were still asleep, and then started her erratic sprinting around the field again. She stumbled once or twice but it didn't deter her from her fun.

'Be careful of hills and holes!' Ka'harja called after her as she passed. 'She's full of energy, isn't she?'

'She's usually like this after eating,' Dena smiled, then realised who she was talking to and frowned. 'She's gotten overexcited because of how much you gave her.'

Ka'harja shrugged. 'Alak bwob, Kekik. Let her have her fun.'

'It's *alík bwab*,' Dena grumbled. 'And I am *not* being unreasonable! She's going to hurt herself— Oh Zen'efay where is she now?'

Ka'harja shrugged and looked around. They were in a hilly part of Okatako so it wasn't surprising that Stars had disappeared from view. 'She won't be far, stop stressing —'

'KEKIK! KA'HARJA!' Stars' shriek cut through the air and both Ka'harja and Dena's ears shot up to pinpoint the direction of the shout.

Dena was the first to move; she bolted over a nearby hill, calling out to her daughter.

Ka'harja hesitated, swallowing the lump of anxiety that had blocked his throat before he followed Dena.

As they came to the top of the rise Ka'harja spotted Stars. She was backing slowly

away from a pair of foxen women.

Koko, Ka'harja remembered from last night. The bad-tempered foxen woman who'd gotten into a fight with one of her fellow guards because he'd tried to flirt with her. Ka'harja didn't recognise the other woman, but she looked terrified and was hiding behind *Koko* with wide eyes and a fluffed-out tail. Ka'harja stopped for a moment, taking in the woman's frazzled magenta hair, before he shouted to her and *Koko*, 'HEY! Leave her alone!'

'What are you doing here, *scum*?' *Koko* snapped at Ka'harja as he came to a stop between her and Stars. She looked even more threatening than the night before, now that Ka'harja could get a good look at her. Her half-healed bruises were deep and purple on her dark skin and her irises were such a pale grey it looked like she'd rolled her eyes all the way around and drawn on new pupils. She held up a fist when Ka'harja didn't respond. 'Har'pies aren't welcome here!'

'Do I *look* like a damn Har'py?!' Ka'harja replied. He tried desperately to stop his voice from breaking, but heard it tremble and had to swallow the lump in his throat. 'I'm Ka'harja Nigelle, and I should be asking *you* what *you're* doing here, and why you're telling people if they are or aren't welcome! I mean, seeing as my mother *owns* this part of Okatako I think it's me and her who should be deciding who can and can't be here!'

'This part of Okatako is—'

'Three kilometre's inside the Nigelle farm border!' Ka'harja interrupted. His voice was higher than he would have liked it to be but he pushed down his fears and continued, 'The fence by the river marks the stop to our land, and you're on the West side. Ergo, on Distro Nigelle's land! And if Distro Nigelle wants to let Har'pies on her land, then you have no right to be kicking them off.'

Koko frowned. 'And does this *Distro Nigelle* want these Har'pies on her land?'

'She gave us breakfast!' Stars blurted. 'And told us to meet the caravan and ask for help. Do you know where the caravan is?'

'We *are* the caravan,' the second foxen stepped out from behind *Koko*. She flicked her tail nervously and twitched an ear as she continued. '*Koko*, I think we should talk to *Sken* about this.'

'*You are the caravan?*' Stars turned the thought over in her mind. After a moment of confused silence, Stars jumped in a sudden panic; trembling from head to toe as she backed away. 'Ka'harja, I don't like the caravan! They're lenta! I want to wait for the other people! Please let us stay with you! I don't want to be with these mup people!'

'Now look what's happened,' *Dena* hissed to Ka'harja. 'I *knew* we'd have been better off just going our own way.'

Ka'harja ignored her. 'Stars, you can't stay. You're not safe here and you know that.'

'Lah'kort will be looking for us,' *Dena* grabbed her daughter's hands in her own. 'You know what he'll do if he finds us.... If he finds Little Demon. Lah'kort zi'kaf tarr.'

Lah'kort will kill them.

The thought sent a shiver down Ka'harja's spine, but not as much as Stars' mournful cry as she put her face in a hand and doubled over.

It was then that *Koko's* companion dared a step towards Har'pies, who both took

two steps back.

Ka'harja smelt, as she moved past him, the two distinctive smells of onions and oil. It was an unbearably strong scent, as if she'd rubbed onion powder in her hair and drunk nothing but vegetable oil for six months, and his eyes watered slightly.

He realised this must be Coborn, and understood why Lif and Trat had ungraciously nicknamed her "*onion girl*."

'You have a baby,' it was a statement, not a question. 'They're very cute....'

'Yi,' Stars pressed her ears down and gave a low growl. Then she bared her teeth and snarled, 'If you try to hurt it I'll hurt you back!'

Coborn flinched and edged behind Koko again, obviously shaken by Stars' tone. She rubbed her neck anxiously and Ka'harja saw she had a tattoo on her collarbone, though he couldn't tell what it was past her thumb. 'I would never hurt anyone, especially a baby.'

'Of course you wouldn't, you don't have the guts to do *anything*,' Koko grumbled. 'This is *exactly* what I was talking about! You're too damn soft!'

Coborn pressed down her ears, but didn't make a retort. Instead, she looked Ka'harja up and down as if she'd only just realised how unusually tall he was. Ka'harja looked back at her and flicked his own ear, trying to seem casual and confident; though as he met Coborn's eye he knew he must have looked as terrified as she did.

'Soft is good. I like soft things,' Stars said with a distracted sigh. 'If you fall on something soft it doesn't hurt.'

'Coborn, why don't you go do your usual thing and burn some more fish?' Koko gave her companion a shove. 'I'll deal with them.'

'But Koko I—'

'Grease fingers! Go!'

Coborn's mouth snapped shut as she looked from person to person. Ka'harja saw she had tears in her eyes before she turned and hurried away.

'Aren't you lovely?' Ka'harja snorted. 'Do you treat everyone like that, or just your friends?'

Koko smiled the least genuine smile Ka'harja had ever seen in his life. She was obviously trying to make her disdain of the trio clear as she continued, 'So what kind of help was it that you wanted from us? You said something about not being able to stay? I don't know if our caravan would be very welcoming of the idea of bringing Har'pies with us on our travels. None of us are fans of cannibals and rapists, you see?'

'Of course, but that would be up to your boss, wouldn't it? You don't really get a say in the matter,' Ka'harja fake-grinned back. 'I think *grease fingers* mentioned talking to someone called Sken?'

'Sken doesn't like to be bothered,' the fake-grin slid off Koko's face and she glared at Ka'harja with a look so fierce he instinctively turned away; only to be met with Dena's own hateful stare that convinced him to turn back to Koko as she spoke. 'And I doubt she'd enjoy being disturbed so some stranger could ask her a favour.'

'And I doubt the Okatoko guard would like to hear about trespassers assaulting the guests of the local potion-maker.'

'Local? The closest town is three weeks away!'

‘Everything in Okatako is three weeks away! I *demand* to speak to your boss, or I’ll send a complaint to Kokakota and have your trespassing stopped! Forcefully, if need be.’

Koko looked Ka’harja in the eye and slowly let go of the bow on her belt as Ka’harja tried to not let his anxiety get the better of him. He was sure his fear was showing—he’d never been good at hiding his emotions— but he met Koko’s gaze as best he could and stared her down.

‘*Are you okay, Ka’harja?*’ Stars asked in a half-whisper, breaking the tense silence and making Ka’harja jump. ‘*You look upset.*’

‘Fine,’ Koko turned away from the group. ‘Alright! If you *demand* to meet Sken, so be it!’

Chapter End.

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