

## Chapter 9: Glif 6<sup>th</sup>, Grada Year 10,053 AE (The Caravan; Okatako)

The caravan was different during the day. All the times Ka'harja had seen it had been at night when it had seemed grey and menacing and big. Now it was bright and lively, and seemed more compact and lived-in. All but the newest of the caravans were made from stained off-white fabric with coloured trims that seemed dirtier and more homely than Ka'harja had originally thought.

It was obvious the caravan had been packing up to leave until Coborn, who stood crying in the middle of six more caravaners (who were attempting, but failing, to comfort her), had returned and burst into tears.

Coborn pointed as the group came over a hill and the caravaners that crowded her stared anxiously. At their guests, or at Koko, Ka'harja couldn't be sure.

Koko strut straight towards them and they all stepped back to let her and her guests through.

Ka'harja recognised four of the six; Baku, Trat, Lif, and Felelor. He assumed the jittery man clinging to Felelor's arm and whispering "*oh good Goddess oh good Goddess actual real life Har'pies Felelor what do we do,*" was Naranako. He had no idea who the last man was, but he had what looked like a dragon bite-mark on his shoulder.

For a moment Ka'harja took in the group. They were all so... average. So normal looking. He'd never really wanted to think of them as people before. He'd always tried to push the idea that they were living, breathing Sentients out of his head.... But now he could see it all too clearly; from Trat's dark scars to Lif's beer gut to Naranako's twitching tail. They were just so *normal*.

Quickly glancing around Ka'harja realised the only person he couldn't see now was the man who'd been groaning over the medical scrolls. He assumed that he was asleep after such a long night. Or studying more scrolls. He seemed like a busy person.

'Be polite. Be respectful. Do *not* speak out of turn.... And for the love of the Goddess, whatever you do, don't upset her wife.'

Ka'harja didn't really care for anything Koko had to say and just rolled his eyes as she listed the rules for meeting her boss. He wanted to stop Stars from nodding along and agreeing to everything she said but he figured that if Stars *did* end up going with the caravan she'd need to understand what was expected of her, so he bit his tongue and followed obediently.

Koko made a beeline for the red-accented caravan and rapped on the door several times.

A few moments later the door was opened and a half-dressed seces stared down at the group.

She was very intimidating, Ka'harja thought. Her skin was a night-sky blue that was dotted with white freckles and sliced with deep pink scars that made her look like a tiger.... At least on the left side of her body. Her entire right side was scarred strange

pink and blue, like her skin and fins had been scraped off and grown back wrong.

She flicked the dangerous-looking barb on her tail and frowned. 'Koko, who are these peop—'

'I thought it was rude to be naked around strangers!' Stars blurted loudly to Ka'harja. 'Why does she get to be shirtless if I can't? That's not fair at all!'

There was a moment of tense quiet before the secas started laughing. 'I'm wearing as much as any secas needs to wear,' she said with a shark-tooth grin. 'Come in.'

Stars was the first to go inside; she didn't hesitate to follow the secas and disappeared through the door. As Dena followed her Ka'harja heard Stars exclaim loudly: 'That's not fair either!'

He hurried in and saw another secas, bright green like mint leaves with deep blue freckles pulling on a tight pair of pants and giggling. Her cheeks were flushed and her tail waved behind her excitedly as she reached for her belt and turned to the newcomers.

'I'm Annanyn,' she greeted happily. Her eyes fell on Little Demon and her gills lifted with a loud squeal of air. Her too-close freckles brightened and blurred together, making her skin look spotted as she covered her mouth and bobbed up and down with excitement. 'Is that a baby?! Can I hold them? Oh, please can I hold them?'

Ka'harja blinked dumbly at her. He'd never actually seen a secas up close.... His mother hadn't been joking when she'd said that they talked through their gills. He was having enough trouble understanding Annanyn as she rambled on as fast as Stars could respond *without* her hiss-like voice echoing through the sides of her neck.

He frowned at her as she latched up her belt —which he didn't think she needed, what with her pants being so tight— and watched as she ever-so-gently took Little Demon from Stars and cradled them in her arms.

'You're so lucky,' she said with a wistful sigh. 'Such a beautiful little baby—'

Ka'harja's eavesdropping was interrupted by a giant, slime-coated dog that saw fit to tackle him to the ground and lick his face. Ka'harja heard himself scream far too late to stop himself and tried to roll away from the beast.

'TUCKER! SIT!' Sken shouted.

The beast hung its head, letting out a squeak-like whine from its fish gills, and retreated to the corner of the room.

'Sorry, you know how incarahs are!'

'I didn't even know there was such a thing as an *incarah*,' Ka'harja tried not to slip in the slime as he got to his feet. He wanted to scream; he was coated in disgusting, snot-like goo from the dog-fish. He hated slime more than anything else in the world!

'So, what's your business here?' Sken asked. 'Are you looking to trade? And what's with the Har'pies? You hire them as your personal guard or something?'

Ka'harja turned to Sken and stared at her. After meeting Koko, he hadn't expected Sken to be so friendly. More than that, it was surreal to finally talk to someone who could look him in the eye.

Sken was only a few inches taller than he was, and Annanyn only a few inches shorter. It threw him off, to say the least, and he blinked; taken aback by the oddity. Then he looked around the room dumbly, as if expecting her to be talking to someone else. When he realised she *was* talking to him his mind went blank and he couldn't

remember why he'd come to meet her; so he tried to find something to talk about.

He couldn't help but notice that Sken was leaning on a smooth wooden tub of murky water; grinning as she dipped her hand in and out and rubbed it on her gills.

'Is that your bed?' he blurted.

'Yes,' Sken chuckled. It was genuine —if not a little shrill through the gills and more like a nasal squeak than a laugh— and Ka'harja relaxed a little. 'It's not for sale.'

'No, no!' Ka'harja grinned back. 'I'm Ka'harja and I, uh... well—'

'Apparently his mother owns this land, and they're wanting to file a formal complaint to Kokakota officials about trespassing,' Koko interrupted with a hiss. 'Although I can't say I've ever heard of this "Distro Nigelle" before. I think he's lying.'

Sken nodded to Koko and raised her brow. 'This is Empire land, isn't it? Free for all Alliance citizens to travel?'

'Not on the West side of the fence,' Ka'harja explained, feeling a little more confident as his memory was jogged. 'By the river. You're on private property.'

'I don't remember seeing any fe—' for a moment, Sken paused. Then her gills flared up and she let out an ear-piercing screech that sounded like some sort of horrible demonic laughter. 'Do you mean to tell me those rotted wooden poles by the river are supposed to be a *fence*?'

'In my defence; there's only two of us maintaining a thousand acres,' Ka'harja shrugged.

Sken crossed her arms and grinned. 'That's a lot of land, how'd you afford that?'

'Land is cheap here; nobody wants to live near the Heck'ne,' Ka'harja pulled Dena close and rested his elbow on her head. 'Not even Har'pies want to live near the Heck'ne!'

Dena let out a growl and Ka'harja immediately realised he'd messed up.

He didn't have time to remove his hand before Dena grabbed it, twisting it violently behind his back and shouting:

*'I WARNED YOU! I warned you not to touch me!'*

Ka'harja heard himself squeal loudly as Dena let his wrist go and kicked him to the ground. He was immediately slobbered on by Tucker, who Sken yanked away and dragged to the caravan's door.

'Oh, I like her,' Koko grinned and ran a finger through a curl in her hair. 'What's your name, my friend?'

Stars crouched down beside Ka'harja, blocking his view of everything except her legs. 'Are you alright, Ka'harja?'

'I'm fine,' Ka'harja grumbled as Stars helped him to his feet. 'Your kekik is *VERY HATEFUL WOMAN!*'

Dena turned at his shout and glared at him, and Ka'harja hid behind Stars.

'Kekik, please don't miita my friend,' Stars said sadly. 'I really don't want two people I love to fight with each other.'

Dena sighed and shook her head slowly before turning away. 'I'll be nicer to your next friend, I promise.'

'You better be!' Stars exclaimed. 'Because she said she's going to help me raise Little Demon! And I don't want you to be mean to her because she's going to help us and

let us go with her, and it would be really ungrateful of you to be mean to her like you are to Ka'harja when she's being so nice!

Sken, who had shut Tucker out of the caravan and turned to watch the argument, tapped her chin and shook her head. 'Annanyn, I thought we agreed to make these sorts of decisions together.'

'I thought it would be alright,' Annanyn shrugged as she passed Little Demon to Dena. 'Besides, she's willing to work in return for food and a place to sleep.'

Ka'harja was shocked. He didn't think Stars would have suggested something like that.... He wasn't sure she fully understood what work out here *meant*, but he tried to shrug it off. If she could survive being a slave in the Heck'ne, she could handle a secas caravan with what seemed like good intentions.

'I'm not very good at many things,' Stars warned. 'But I'll try and learn and help with whatever you want me to do. Kami mip kimplt, even if I'm hakalika.'

'We can't leave her, Sken,' Annanyn took Sken's hands in hers and tilted her head. It took a lot for Ka'harja not to laugh at her deliberately over-the-top, supposed-to-be cute voice as she continued: '*Pwease, kelp knot? Pwetty pwetty pwease can she come?*'

'Alright, alright, you win!' Sken untangled her wife's tail from her waist and nodded to Stars. 'I *will* expect you to make good on that promise, though.'

'Thank woo, Skenny-kins,' Annanyn wrapped her arms around Sken and kissed her chest.

'I said you *won*,' Sken put an arm around Annanyn and returned the kiss by nipping her firmly on the cheek. 'So stop using that *awful* voice!'

Annanyn broke into a fit of giggles and winked at Ka'harja as Sken shoved her away.

Ka'harja felt himself smile. Sken and Annanyn looked really good together. He hoped he could find a guy he could be that happy with one day.... Although, that would involve meeting people. And he didn't really like doing that.

'So, not to pry,' Sken's voice made Ka'harja jump. 'But I *do* have to know, what's your backstory?'

'Our backstory?' Stars blinked. 'Do you mean why we're here?'

'Yes, what happened? Why are you leaving the Heck'ne?'

'Our troop doesn't like tia'fio children,' Dena explained. 'When Neg— Um.... When Stars had her baby we had to leave or it would have been killed—'

'He,' Stars interrupted. 'Annanyn said Little Demon is a he.'

'We had to leave or *he* would have been killed,' Dena corrected herself. 'And even if we went back now and let them kill him, I don't think I'd be allowed to live, either.'

'Why not?' Sken asked.

'She kasa Kay'oten on the head with a rock so she couldn't follow us!' Stars blurted.

Ka'harja inhaled so sharply he choked on his own spit.

'*Kay'oten?*' he gagged. 'Kay'oten as in *Pert'ana and Kay'oten?*'

Stars pricked up her ears with excitement. 'Have you met them?'

'I— They're my *parents*,' Ka'harja's mouth went dry and he could barely speak.

'*That's* where I know you from!' Dena gasped and pointed at Ka'harja threateningly. 'You're Kay'oten's son! How did I not realise? You look exactly like her!'

You didn't even change your name how could I— How could I have forgotten you?'

'I don't think he looks like Kay'oten,' Stars said plainly. 'His smile is too big. I think that's why we didn't recognise him! He's changed a lot. Last time I saw him he was crying and covered in blood and had a bone in his leg. His voice has gotten better, too! Just like mine has.'

A sudden wave of realisation washed over Ka'harja and he let out a loud shout. 'YOU! You're the girl who let me go!'

'I think we're missing something here,' Sken sucked her gills down and elbowed Koko.

'Context, maybe?' responded Koko. 'Hey, Ka'harja! I thought you said your mother was called Distro! I *knew* you were lying.'

'I wasn't lying!' Ka'harja snapped. 'Ever heard of adoption before? Or do you just stuff your unwanted spawn back in?'

Koko started to argue but was cut off by Sken's screeching laugh.

'Now *that's* an image!' Sken exclaimed as she doubled over. 'Stuff it back in! Annanyn did you hear that?'

'I heard it,' obviously unimpressed, Annanyn rolled her eyes. 'It was crude.'

Sken pet Annanyn's shoulder. 'You mean hilarious!'

'Disrespectful little shit!' Koko snapped, her blush matching her bruises. 'I should—I'm going to— FUCK YOU!'

'You can't fuck him, he's gay,' Stars said, clearly misunderstanding Koko's exclamation. 'He doesn't like girls.'

Koko turned to snap at Stars but stopped when she saw her face. Stars looked proud of herself... but in a nervous way; as if she wasn't completely sure she'd said the right thing but was hoping she had.

It reminded Ka'harja of a time in his childhood when he'd been desperate to prove to Distro he was ready to be her thieving apprentice. He'd stacked chairs in order to reach a high shelf in the kitchen where Distro kept a small supply of gold coins. He'd almost had the coins when Distro had walked in. He'd held his breath then and pulled a very similar face to the one Stars was pulling now; he'd been hoping for praise and compliments on how smart and resourceful he'd been, instead of being scolded for ignoring Distro's orders.

Ka'harja was never sure what Distro had opened her mouth to say that night as he'd promptly lost his balance, fallen, and knocked himself unconscious.

He wasn't going to let Stars be scolded for something as trivial as misinterpreting an insult. He couldn't.

'She's right, I'm gay,' Ka'harja tried to laugh. It was obviously fake but it made Stars smile from ear to ear.

'Yes! He's gay!'

Koko shrugged and turned to Sken. 'So... apparently he's gay.'

'Are you okay?' Annanyn put her hand on Dena's shoulder and she jumped.

Until Annanyn had disturbed her, Dena had been staring at Ka'harja with wide, terrified eyes. Her mouth still hung open now as she looked around nervously, her jaw trembling. She twitched an ear and turned back to Ka'harja. 'Good for you,' she finally

managed.

Sken smacked Ka'harja on the back. He nearly fell over with the force of her slap. 'Yeah, good for you!' she teased.

'Thanks,' Ka'harja's cheeks blushed hot. He really wished Stars hadn't blurted out his sexuality but there was no way to take it back now. He tried to change the subject. 'And thanks for agreeing to take the girls.'

'No worries!' Sken gave a terrifying grin and Ka'harja tried not to imagine how much it would hurt to be bitten by those sharp, sharp teeth. 'The way I see it, as long as the girls are willing to do a little bit of work there's no reason we can't give them a hand!'

'What kind of work will we be doing?' Stars asked. 'I'm not very strong or fast, but I have a lot of patience and I like to learn things! I'm very good at building hovels out of sticks and mud and fur! Mine always last the longest when we travel, everyone else's always fall down after three or four weeks, but *mine* can last months! Although, you have these nice big wooden things. They seem very strong and don't look like they're going to fall down anytime soon. How do you move them? They're too big to carry. Your troop must be very strong. You are at least, Sken! You have big muscles! I think you'd even be able to beat Reak'nak in a fight! Do you move everything yourself? You look strong enough to carry one of these things around! I don't think I'd be able to carry much around. I'm not sure what I'll be able to do for you, because I'm not very good at much. Maybe I could help burn Coborn's fish! I'm very good at burning things. Whatever you make me do though, I promise I'll try *really* hard. Also is it okay if I sometimes do Kekik's work? She gets very tired and sometimes she has trouble doing things. I'll work extra hard if it means Kekik can rest—'

For the first time since they'd come into the caravan, Sken wasn't smiling. She looked horrified. She turned to Koko and mouthed: *she won't stop*.

Koko's ears were flattened down as she tried to block out Stars' voice. 'Is this normal for her, or should we be worried?'

'Nah, she does this all the time,' Ka'harja grinned. His gaze met Koko's and he felt almost victorious as he watched Koko suffer. She deserved it for insulting his mother.

Stars hurried over to Sken. She was in the middle of a sentence, but nobody seemed to be listening... except for Annanyn.

'STARS, NO!' Annanyn shrieked as Stars planted her palm firmly on the scarred side of Sken's face.

'—it's very pink,' she finished. There was an awkward pause before Stars pulled away with a shout. 'It feels like spit! It feels like really awful spit from the back of your throat when you're sick! Are you sick?'

Sken looked at her blankly. 'No that's... that's how all seces skin feels.'

'It's disgusting,' Stars said simply. 'Is it uncomfortable?'

'No, but the racism is,' Sken frowned and rolled her eyes.

'Well, uh, I guess I'll head off then,' Ka'harja flicked his tail. He was anxious to get out of the crowded caravan and back to his mother. 'Try not to be too offensive, Stars.'

Stars waved happily to Ka'harja as he hopped out of the caravan. 'Bye Ka'harja! See you tonight!'

He didn't have the heart to tell her that was very, very unlikely. So instead he gave

her a friendly wave and walked away.

Ka'harja hoped to get home before too long. He hated the idea of leaving his mother half-sober. Perhaps he could put all the drink on the higher shelves so she couldn't reach them.... No; she'd find a way to get to it. And probably hurt herself while doing so—

'Afternoon, my friend! I heard you and your companions were talking to Sken? What about? All good news I hope!'

Ka'harja nearly jumped out of his skin when he heard Baku's voice calling out. He forced himself to smile and turned to face the guard. 'Just asking for a bit of help for the girls. No need to worry, Baku.'

As soon as the name escaped his mouth Ka'harja's chest tightened and he felt the uncontrollable urge to backflip into the sun and die. He couldn't believe he'd let that slip!

Baku just stared at Ka'harja and frowned. 'Have we met?'

'Yes!' Ka'harja lied. His voice broke with fear and he gave a quick cough, which he pretended was a badly-timed sneeze. 'We met last year. Don't you remember me?'

Luckily Baku seemed to think Ka'harja had been offended and not terrified. He glanced at his feet before apologising. 'Ah, sorry. I'm usually real good with faces. I can't think of how I'd forget yours; it's very unique.'

Ka'harja shrugged and tried to laugh. 'You were pretty drunk, I'm not surprised you don't remember.'

'Ah! That would explain it,' an uneven grin spread across Baku's face, squashing his scars until they looked like age lines on his otherwise young face. 'I wouldn't have thought I'd forget a man like you! But I suppose I wouldn't remember forgetting, would I?'

Ka'harja laughed. *That was relatable.*

'I have to get back to work —the caravan's leaving soon— but I hope we see each other again next year.'

Smiling back awkwardly, Ka'harja gave Baku a nod. He figured Baku was the sort of guy to draw attention to himself and in a panicked attempt to make his story more believable, he took a gamble. 'Right, and you can do that party trick again.'

'The one with the two bottles and the chikchik? Sure!' with a wave, Baku turned and strutted away.

Ka'harja walked as calmly as he could until he was out of the caravan's sight.... Then he sprinted away as fast as he could in the direction of his house. He ran until he tripped and fell into a hole. Too exhausted to pull himself out from the small incline, he instead opted to sob into the grass and call himself an idiot.

How could he have been so stupid? He nearly got himself caught! He felt like he was going to throw up.

He closed his eyes and could see the entire scene unfold in his mind; with a different ending where he'd said the wrong thing and been stabbed on the spot. Different outcomes played in his head over and over like some anxiety-induced vision of his could-have-been death.

He sat trembling in the hole for what could have been anywhere between five minutes and five hours before he was finally able to calm himself down. He rolled over onto his back and took a deep, relaxing breath.

Now that his panic was starting to ebb, he couldn't help but wonder: *what sort of party trick could you do with two bottles and a chikchik?*

He was staring up at the sky, wondering what Baku could have possibly meant, when he saw dark clouds of smoke start to float overhead.

Ka'harja sat up. Was the smoke... coming from the direction of his house?

*Oh Great Star no!* All of Ka'harja's exhaustion was replaced with panic. He jumped to his feet, his aching body forgotten as he raced home. *Mum!*

It was the fastest he'd ever run before. The land around him was a blur as he sped towards his house. The blur got darker and more smoke-coated with every step and Ka'harja's panic continued to rise.

When he saw his house he let out an explosive shriek and was so shocked he forgot to stop running. He would have slammed into the door if it had been on its hinges; instead he flung himself into the burning building and started calling for his mother.

'Mum! Mum are you alright? Where are you?'

He jumped over bottles and dodged flames as he searched for Distro.

He found her on the floor of the kitchen. She was unconscious, barely breathing as she lay in a puddle of her own blood. There were deep wounds down her side, like she'd been attacked by an angry gryphon, and her face was bruised.

Ka'harja was scared to move her but he had to get her out of the fire. He picked her up as quickly as he dared and carried her out of the house, moving her over a nearby hill upwind of the fire. Carefully, he put her down in the grass, then he pulled off her shirt and pressed the clean side of it against her wound to stop the bleeding.

*What happened?* Ka'harja's mind was racing over the possibilities. Had he left the fire going after making porridge? *No, that wouldn't explain the scratches!* Had Distro tried to get to a high shelf and fallen? *But then why was there fire?*

He pressed the shirt firmer against Distro's wound and grit his teeth. There was one possibility that made sense but he didn't want to believe it. Naranako's words from the night before echoed in his mind.

*Har'pies never come this far into Okatako.*

Yes, they do.

A tear rolled down Ka'harja's smoke-coated cheek and he tried to wipe it off, only to leave a smear of his mother's blood under his eye.

*It couldn't have been Har'pies, could it?* Ka'harja argued with himself. *They've never dared anything like this before! Why would they do this now?*

Ka'harja knew why, but didn't want to think about it. He distracted himself from the thought by focusing on helping his mother.

By the time Distro's eyes flickered open, the smoke was thinning and the crackle of the fire was dying down.

'Ka'harja?' she questioned quietly. At first her rasping didn't sound like words, but she became clearer as she continued. 'Are you alright?'

'I'm fine, Mum,' Ka'harja dared to take the pressure off her wound and let out a relieved sigh when he saw it had stopped bleeding. 'Don't get up! You're hurt.'

'Don't tell... me what to do,' Distro groaned, ignoring Ka'harja's protests and lifting herself to her feet. Her wound began to ooze slowly but she pushed Ka'harja away. 'I



have to.... Where did they.... Where did they go?’

‘Who?’ asked Ka’harja.

‘The Har’pies!’ exclaimed Distro. ‘They.... They’re looking for Stars. I think. They called her Neg’an.’

Ka’harja nodded. He couldn’t seem to speak. He looked at his smoke-coated mother and then turned to the house. He felt his heart wrench sideways. The house that had been his shelter since he’d run away from the Heck’ne; the house that had withstood floods as high as the roof, survived storms that picked up trees and blew them past the horizon... and even kept standing after falling stars shook the planet.... It was gone. Reduced to ash and a few half-walls.

No, Ka’harja closed his eyes. He hoped that it was a dream. He’d close his eyes and wake up and he’d have fallen asleep at the table while talking to Stars and this nightmare was just because he’d eaten too much at breakfast.

Deep inside he knew it was hopeless, but he tried anyway.

‘It’ll be alright,’ Distro put her hand on Ka’harja’s shoulder. ‘It was just stuff. Nobody got hurt.’

‘You did,’ Ka’harja whispered.

‘Scratches heal,’ Distro sighed and leant against her son. ‘As long as you’re alright, I’ll be okay.’

Ka’harja sniffed sadly and put an arm around his mother. They watched for a long time as smoke rose from the ruins of their house. Even when the fire had burnt itself out, the air surrounding the house was distorted by the remaining heat.

‘They must have done something awful to piss the Har’pies off *this* much,’ said Distro. ‘I’ve never known Har’pies to care enough about runaways to follow them past the border.’

Ka’harja sighed. ‘They may or may not have beaten their leader. With a rock. A big one.’

Shocked, Distro stared at her son. Then she gave an exhausted half-laugh. ‘Explains why they had two troops with them.’

‘They had *two* troops?’ Ka’harja swallowed anxiously. ‘Are you sure?’

Distro nodded. ‘A foxen and nurlak troop, and a jutt-jaw family.’

Ka’harja put a hand over his mouth. ‘We have to do something....’

‘We can’t do anything. There were at least fifty of them.’

‘Exactly! The caravan isn’t that big!’ Ka’harja gripped his mother by the shoulders. He almost shook her in frustration but managed to control himself. ‘They’re going to need all the help they can get fighting them off!’

‘We’ll never catch them in time,’ said Distro as she hung her head.

‘No! We can get to them in less than ten minutes if we hurry!’ Ka’harja pointed away from the setting sun. ‘I didn’t track that caravan’s route for five years to *not* know how to catch up to them! If we head straight and cut across the river we’ll catch them!’

Distro looked to Ka’harja. Her gaze followed his finger to the horizon and she sighed. ‘Okay.... Let’s get going, then.’

Ka’harja pushed his anxiety to the back of his mind and helped his mother limp across the blackened field.

They had to get to the caravan before the Har'pies did.  
They had to help them!

## **Chapter End.**

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