

Prologue:
Lorane 8th, Firthda
Year 10,044 AE
(The Wasteland's Edge; Heck'ne)

The wasteland was worse than usual.

Filthy brown clouds coated the sky in thick layers that blocked out the sun and the constant rainfall they produced had turned the usually-dusty wasteland into a giant mud puddle. Even the deep rock holes that lead into the planet —the ga'oa pits— were beginning to crumble at the edges.

The native Har'pies rumoured that peering into the pits was like looking into the depths of the forever-dark. They believed ga'oa were gateways to the dreaded Underfor; where rocks shone like stars and goblins devoured not only the body, but the soul.

Ka'harja had never really believed in star-shining rocks or goblins, but he knew about death. He'd seen low-ranking Har'pies thrown into the pits before. Sometimes there'd be echoes as they hit the cave's deep bottom. Other times, their cries would fade into silence, absorbed into the endless black. Even at his young age, Ka'harja knew it would be impossible to survive the fall. He didn't like the thought of going anywhere near the ga'oa, which seemed even more menacing now than before the six-day rain had started. Before the downpour the holes had been strong and stable, but now mud flowed into them like slow, filthy waterfalls and the edges crumbled at even the most gentle touch.

The ga'oa pits were terrifying; that's why Ka'harja had always tried to avoid them. Falling into the ga'oa was his biggest fear... but now he didn't have a choice. He was going to be thrown in.

There was nothing he could do to stop his parents as they dragged him through the mud towards the pit. They were going to kill him.

'Plea-th,' Ka'harja begged through tears. 'Plea-th don't! I'll do bet-der! I'll do bet-der!'

His mother struck him across the face. 'Shut up, you little disappointment!'

Blood trickled down Ka'harja's cheek where his mother's nails had left their mark. And he screamed in agony as his father grabbed him by the ear and yanked him sideways.

'You're an embarrassment,' his father spat as he threw Ka'harja at the hole. 'You're borne from the greatest warriors the troop has seen in years, yet you are the most pathetic excuse for a Har'py I've ever known!'

'I'm th-orry!' Ka'harja's tongue felt bigger than usual as his legs slid over the edge of the pit. The ground was soft and unstable but he managed to stop himself from falling.

'Did you hear that, Kay'oten? He's "*th-orry*"!' his father mocked, turning to the woman beside him. '*Th-orry* for being *uth-eleth*!'

'Shut up, Pert'ana!' Kay'oten hissed before turning and advancing on her son. 'You're a foxen, Ka'harja! You have no excuse to be so pathetic! Maybe— Maybe if I'd

had you with Lah'kort I could understand —not that I'd ever let a *nurlak* touch me—but you are *our* son! A foxen! With a pure bloodline that's entangled itself for generations! It's shameful that you've inherited nothing of our family's strength. To you, and to our ancestors. Shameful and humiliating!

Tears rolled down Ka'harja's cheeks as he struggled in the mud. He managed to crawl away from the hole, but his feet kept slipping out from underneath him as he tried to stand.

'What, can't get up?' his father hissed as Ka'harja tried to get his footing. 'That's just embarrassing! Come on, son! You should at least put up a fight before you die. At least *try* to have some honour!'

The Har'pies watched their son flop in the mud with disgust.

'It should have been him who died,' Kay'oten hissed. 'Sai'karsa never would have humiliated herself like this. Do you hear that, Ka'harja? Your sister was more than you'll ever be! *It should have been you!*'

'It wa-then't my fault!' Ka'harja fought desperately for balance in the mud, sinking deeper with each attempt to stand. He inhaled sharply as his foot made contact with rock. The rock was solid but slippery; he managed to jam his foot into a hole and balanced himself. 'I tried!' he shouted through tears. 'I tried to th-ave her!'

Tears streaked lines through the mud on his face as Ka'harja faced his parents.

'*It wa-then't my fault!*' he repeated. 'Plea-th, ju-tht th-top...'

'Stop crying and face death like a Har'py—' his mother was cut off by her own surprised shout as the ground slid out from under her feet.

She stumbled dangerously close to the pit, but managed to catch her footing before she reached the edge. A look of embarrassment flashed across her face; which she hid with rage.

She let out an angry shout and lunged at her son, making a grab for his ear as she did.

Pain shot through Ka'harja's trapped leg as his mother slammed into him. There was a snap and a short spurt of blood sprayed upwards into his mother's face.

The Har'py screeched and stumbled back in shock. She collided with her partner, who slipped in the mud and fell backwards.

There was a loud *CRACK* as Ka'harja's father landed and the side of the ga'oa pit lurched under the sudden weight of the foxen man. It dragged him down with it as it fell, and the warrior's screams were cut short as a river of mud followed him.

Ka'harja felt his breath catch in his throat as he yanked his leg out of the hole. He struggled to his feet, barely able to feel his own body past the heavy beating of his heart as he watched his mother collapse at the edge of the pit.

'PERT'ANA!' she shrieked, grabbing at her own scalp and scoring deep scratches into her face. 'PERT'ANA! PERT'ANA!'

The Har'py began screaming her partner's name over and over in a fit of grief, and Ka'harja didn't wait for her to remember he existed. He saw his chance and began sprinting across the wasteland. He tried to ignore the agony in his leg and didn't dare look down in fear of what he might see.

If he looked, it became real. And he didn't want it to be real.

The rain fell heavier as he ran, obscuring his vision and chilling him to the bone. He could barely see an arm's length ahead as he ran blindly through the downpour. He ran and ran— Until he collided with someone and fell backwards into the mud.

'I-I'm th-orry!' he stammered, raising his hands defensively. Fear shot through him in the form of a million dreadful questions. Who was it? What would they do to him? Would they take him back to his mother? Would they kill him themselves? 'Plea-th don't hurt me! I'm th-orry!'

The only response he got was a strange, raspy groan.

Slowly, Ka'harja dared to look up and saw he'd run into a girl only a few years older than himself; a nurlak who pushed herself up using her four thin arms, and then turned to look at him with a mournful gaze.

The girl was from his troop, he realised. She was the deformed daughter of his father's most loyal follower. *Hakalika*, he'd heard her called. Hakalika in the head.

Crazy and hakalika and not good at thinking.

'You're Ka'harja. Yi,' it wasn't a question; but a statement.

She knew who he was, and Ka'harja knew he didn't have to nod. But he did anyway. And just like she'd stated his name, he stated hers; 'You're Neg'an.'

'Mhm. What happened to your leg?' she asked hoarsely— This time, it *was* a question.

Reminded of his injury, Ka'harja glanced down. He nearly threw up when he saw a jagged chunk of bone poking out from his thigh, and the sight of the injury triggered a response in his brain. He began to wail in agony as the wound became real and he remembered what was happening.

Neg'an gripped him tight with three of her arms and covered his mouth with the fourth. She was stronger than she looked and although he struggled, Ka'harja couldn't pull away from her. He trembled in her grip as she suppressed his wailing into a quiet sob. After he was quiet she released him and then, breathing heavily, she stood and offered him her hand.

She sighed when Ka'harja flinched away from her, her breath rasping strangely as she struggled to breathe. Her eyes seemed to look past Ka'harja instead of at him, and she swayed in place.

'The sky is crying for you,' she said, flicking her ears.

Ka'harja's heart gave a jolt when she spoke and he finally let her help him to his feet as he looked up at the thick blanket of clouds, trying to ignore the pain in his leg. Water splashed onto his face and stung his eyes, blurring his vision as he turned back to the girl.

'Ith it?' he managed. 'I didn't know the th-ky could cry for uth.'

Neg'an looked at him sadly. 'I'm crying for you too,' she told him. 'But you can't see it because the sky's tears have gotten too mixed up with mine. It's a mup time, tonight. My heart felt so heavy when your sister died. So tiirl. And now my eyes are crying with the sky for you.'

Ka'harja tried to look for tears on her cheeks, but she was right: the rain had made her face too wet to see them. Instead his attention was drawn to her deformities and, slowly, he reached out and placed his hand on her forehead. He could feel the strange

bumps where her second set of eyes should have been, as if they were still in her head, under her forever-closed lids.

'You only ha-th two eye-th.... It look-th like you have a fok-then fa-th,' he trembled as he tried to distract himself from his pain. 'Ec-thept for your ear-th. They need fur.'

'I like the way you talk,' Neg'an rasped. 'It's always made me feel less alone.'

'You *like* my voi-th?' Ka'harja felt his jaw tense as tears welled in his eyes.

'Kosson, my friend,' she said with a cough. 'I won't tell anyone I saw you. You'll be okay.'

'Promi-th?' his voice broke as he spoke. 'Do you promi-th it will be okay?'

She nodded, slowly and deliberately, before opening her mouth to speak— But she coughed again instead, much more violently this time, and ended up on her knees as she gasped for breath.

'Neg'an!' a terrified voice called through the night. 'Where are you?! Come home! Broja'kar! It's too cold! Your throat will swell! Neg'an, come home now! Broja'kar now, Neg'an!'

The nurlak turned and twitched her pointed ears as the woman called to her. Then she stumbled to her feet, rasping a goodbye to Ka'harja as she disappeared into the thick rain.

Ka'harja watched her leave, shocked by her kindness. It was rare to find a Har'py as gentle as she had been, and it made him forget himself for a moment as he felt strength flow through him.

He was going to be okay. Neg'an had promised it. She'd promised he would be okay.

And he.... He *believed* her.

'KA'HARJA!'

Ka'harja tensed as his mother's voice shrieked over the rain.

'WHERE ARE YOU, KA'HARJA? I'LL KILL YOU! DO YOU HEAR ME? I *WILL* FIND YOU!'

All of Ka'harja's fears came crashing back down on him and he found himself running. Despite his injured leg he ran faster than he ever had before. Faster than he thought he could. He ran until he couldn't breathe and doubled over, collapsing into the mud and feeling the sting of infection start in his wound.

As he caught his breath he looked up and saw that he was only a short distance away from the edge of the wasteland; where the mud ended and grass began. So... he forced himself to keep moving, groaning in agony as he pushed himself to his feet and stumbled on. Every movement he made sent a new wave of pain through his body. But he couldn't stop.

He wasn't sure how he'd made it this far. Everything was cold and sore and confusing. But he couldn't stop himself from moving forward. Even if he wanted to — even if he tried— he wasn't sure he'd be able to bring himself to collapse. Not now.

Painfully he stepped onto the grassy field and dared a glance back at the wasteland, giving a sigh of relief as he saw his footprints swallowed into the muddy ground.

His mother would never find him.

Knowing that was enough to keep the child staggering forward.

Squinting into the distance, he swore he could see a light. It may have been a fire from another troop. Or maybe it was the sun rising. He didn't know; he'd never been out of the wasteland before and everything looked different.

Absently the boy staggered towards the light. He didn't care what happened anymore. He was tired and he ached all over. He didn't care if the light was another Har'py troop; he could reason with them. And if he couldn't, at least they'd kill him quickly and end the hurting.

The light grew brighter and brighter until he found himself at a... strange sort of structure that he'd never seen before.

It was big and square with a slanted top. It's shape reminded him of the worn-down hovels his family used for shelter. Only it was larger. And it stood straighter.

Warm light poured out holes in its sides and Ka'harja found himself drawn to the strange building. He staggered against its wall and stood at his full height to peer into one of the holes.

He couldn't really understand what he was looking at. The ground inside was covered in strangely coloured objects. Some looked like they had liquid inside, while others didn't, and some were broken into smaller pieces with jagged edges that reminded him of sharp, too-long fingernails.

There must have been a hundred of them scattered about the building, all leading up to a rocky dent in the wall where a small fire crackled underneath a round black stone that steamed strangely.

Ka'harja sighed. He was cold and wet and longed for the warmth and dryness fire would bring.

Without thinking, he moved to climb into the hole, but couldn't. He wasn't sure what kind of magic had stopped him, but he'd banged his head against the air as if it were stone.

He raised a hand and touched the smudged mark that had been left on the solid air.

What was it?

He banged the air with his fist and it made a strange *thunk*, like a hollow log, but not quite the same.

So he banged it again, harder this time, and it shattered into a rain of tiny stones like the colourful ones inside.

Ka'harja pulled away as they tinkered to the ground and stared at his bleeding hand. They'd bitten him! The rocks had bitten him!

'Har'py shits!' a voice cut through the air. 'I've told y'all before to— You get— Get out! Stop breaking my windows! I'll fucking— Nobody breaks Distro's windows!'

Ka'harja jumped as a chunk of wall spun open and light spilt onto the grass. A woman staggered out as if possessed. She was clinging onto the strange moving wall as if her life depended on it.

'Great Star!' the woman exclaimed as she saw Ka'harja. 'It's a little goblin at my door! What are you— What are you doing here? I'm not going to give you food, so if that's what you're looking for you can fuck right off back to the caves.... Go on. Fuck off. *Fuck off you little scumble-butt!*'

Too tired to run, Ka'harja stood staring at the loud, sick-looking woman. He was transfixed by how her skin glowed in the firelight. She was so pale... she looked like a living corpse!

'What the fuck?' she breathed, squinting at the child. 'You're the best-looking goblin I've ever seen! Oh, you're not a kobold, are you? Because if you are I'll have no choice but to batter you and stick you in the deep-fryer!'

Ka'harja felt like his heart was going to jump out his mouth. 'I'm not a goblin or a kobold,' he said. 'I'm Ka'hartha— Ka'har... Ka'hartha—'

'Ka'harja? That's a Har'py name,' the woman managed to steady herself enough to let go of the moving wall. She let out a snort of a laugh and looked down her nose at Ka'harja. 'Just as well; the deep-fryer's broken. What are you doing here, you little vandal? Run a bit far while hunting?'

'I'm cold and I'm hurt,' Ka'harja admitted, pointing at his broken leg in a desperate attempt for pity. 'And I don't want to be a Har'py anymore. Plea-th let me th-tay.'

The woman stared for a long, long moment before sniffing and leaning back against the moving wall. She licked her lips for a minute, then squinted.

'You're a runaway?' she asked, continuing before Ka'harja could answer. 'Do you want to be my son? I've been thinking about getting one for a while, and you'd do well enough. Bit thin, but I can fix that for you in a month.'

Ka'harja wasn't sure if she was being serious.

Be her... her son? Was that allowed? Could she just... be his mother? Just like that?

And how would she treat him? Would she be nice? Would she be mean? Would she hit him?

Ka'harja didn't know what to think— But his stomach rumbled and the woman's ears twitched curiously, and she sighed and held out her hands.

'I'm not th-th-ure,' he muttered, creeping closer and feeling warmth seep into his cold joints from the hole in the strange structure. 'But plea-th, can I th-tay with you? I'm tired...'

'Come on in,' she smiled, scooping Ka'harja into her arms and stumbling uneasily inside. 'I'll make you something to eat.'

Chapter End.

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