

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

She'd done everything she wasn't supposed to.

The horrible brown clouds poured down their thick rain that turned the wasteland's surface into a layer of thick, sticky mud. Even the firmest parts of the ground would sink under too much weight, sending people falling to their deaths if they were unlucky enough to put their feet down on one of the many ga'oa pits hidden across the land.

Ga'oa pits were horrible things to a Har'py.

They were pits that led to caves deep in the planet.

Caves that inhabited demons, and goblins, and spirits of betrayers and traitors that had been thrown into the holes and left to their agonising deaths. Rumours said their ghosts would one day be eaten by evil creatures and trapped forever in magical glowing stones that spread across skin like rot and killed from the inside out.

Neg'an had never been allowed to watch the executions. But when the son of the troop's leader had been put to death she couldn't help being curious. She'd wandered out into the rain to listen as his parents dragged him away. He'd screamed so loud she'd felt her bones shudder.... He didn't deserve to die. He'd done nothing to deserve it. She wasn't sure why they felt he had to die, just because he had been there when his sister had fallen into a ga'oa.

Perhaps they blamed him for her death. He was supposed to be watching her, after all. But he was only nine. He couldn't stop the ground from opening beneath her. Not even Zen'efay herself could save her people from Scara's jaws. Not when the rain poured down the way it did.

It made her scared. He'd always made her feel safe; she'd told herself if his lisp didn't cost him his life then her raspy, aching throat wouldn't cost her hers. If he was allowed to then live maybe, just maybe, she could live, too.

But he *hadn't* been allowed to live. He had been put to death. And if he hadn't killed his father he would never have gotten away.

That and... if Neg'an hadn't lied about the direction he'd run.

'WHAT DO YOU MEAN PERT'ANA IS DEAD?' the enraged shriek from Neg'an's father was barely audible over the rain, but Neg'an still flinched as he turned to their troop's leader.

'I mean Ka'harja killed him!' Kay'oten snapped back. 'That whelp of a boy sent him over the edge of the ga'oa! To his death, Lah'kort! He sent him to his death!'

'Are you *sure*?' asked Lah'kort, his breath short as the words sunk in. 'Are you *sure* he died?'

'It was a landslide,' Kay'oten put her hands over her head, her nails falling perfectly in place with the fresh wounds she'd gouged into herself in grief. 'I heard his screams choke out. He was buried. Buried in mud and filth in the worst of Underfor! He's lost.'

His body and soul. Forever....'

'What do we do?' Lah'kort's question was scarcely a whisper. He watched Kay'oten for a moment before losing his patience and shouting, 'KAY'OTEN! GIVE ME AN ORDER!'

At the shout, Kay'oten drew herself to her full height; though, that wasn't very high at all. Being foxen, she barely stood as tall as an eleven year old nurlak.... But Neg'an still flinched. Kay'oten was as strong as anyone who dared challenge her. No matter how much bigger than her they were. She'd taken on nurlak and harpies and even mouth-frothing sabre cats, and she'd *always* won....

'Get me a hunting party!' she spat. 'I want him found! I want justice! I want him killed— Na! Na! I want him alive so I can kill him myself! I want him caught and brought to me so I can *strangle* the *last* little spark of *worthless* life out of his eyes! I want to see his *soul drain* from his pathetic carcass and I want to savour every moment of it for myself!'

Kay'oten's anger only made Neg'an more glad she'd lied about Ka'harja's escape, and she watched in silence as her father gathered a group of their best trackers and set out into the weather.

She knew it was pointless. She'd seen Ka'harja limp away, his blood diluted to nothing by the rain and his footprints swallowed up by the hungry and muddy ground.... He was Gone. Un-findable. Un-trackable. He had done all Neg'an had ever dreamt of doing and escaped the Heck'ne.

For a moment she wondered why she hadn't followed him. Why she hadn't ignored her mother's calls and limped with him to the ends of the horizon. The idea of escaping the Heck'ne had sent a flutter through her chest that had made breathing harder than usual.

But the idea of freedom seemed so much less enticing without her family to join her.

Neg'an shook her head and sighed, her breath catching in her throat as a cough.

'Neg'an! Deep breaths. Deep breaths, my beautiful carrot,' her mother had been closer than she'd thought. In only a few moments she'd grabbed Neg'an and was rubbing her back desperately. 'Breathe big in. And breathe big out.'

'I'm mip, kekik,' Neg'an rasped, putting her arms around the back of her mother's neck and clinging to her tightly. 'It was just one cough.'

'Are you sure?' her mother asked, fear clinging to her voice. 'You know how you are in the cold.'

Neg'an buried her face into her mother's shoulder and muttered. She wished her mother was able to pick her up like she used to. Hold her close and make everything seem better.... But her mother was as small as Kay'oten; her growth was stunted, she'd said. From a sickness. Though Neg'an didn't understand it.

'You would think *Lah'kort* had been Pert'ana's myit, the fuss he's making.... Whatever happened to him?'

'What do you mean "what happened to him," Kekik?' asked Neg'an. 'Hasn't Gorg always been like this?'

'*Broja'kar mia! Don't let him hear you call him that,*' Neg'an's mother gave her a

tight squeeze and lowered her voice to a firm whisper. *'Call him by his name. Or call him Yalfit. Nothing else. Do you remember what he did last time you called him Gorg?'*

A horrible shiver coursed through Neg'an and she nuzzled tighter into her mother's arms. She remembered. She hadn't been able to turn her head properly for a week after the beating she'd been so sore. 'I'm sorry, Kekik.'

'You never have to be sorry to me,' her mother whispered. *'My sweet little carrot. You never have to be sorry to me.'*

'DENA'COsa!' Kay'oten's voice screeched through the rain.

Neg'an's mother jumped at her name and quickly let go of her daughter. 'Yes, Kay'oten?'

'I don't want anyone else wandering off tonight,' voice low, Kay'oten stepped so close to Dena'cosa their noses touched. 'Keep those ababhi daughters of yours close. If either of them gets in our way I'll punish them as if they let Ka'harja go themselves!'

Neg'an felt a shiver run down her spine and she gripped her mother's hands tightly as Kay'oten stalked away. She wondered if she should tell her mother that she *had* let Ka'harja go herself— But what good would that do? He was gone now. She'd only get in trouble.

'Come on, little carrot,' Dena'cosa sighed and gently led her daughter toward their sleeping hovel. 'You heard Kay'oten. Stay close to me tonight.'

'I'm *kizza* ababhi...' Neg'an rasped. 'Am I?'

'No, carrot,' Dena'cosa comforted, sitting her daughter down in their bed. 'You're na ababhi.'

'Definitely not,' a voice muttered from the corner of the small shelter. There was a sniff, and Neg'an's older sister sat up from under her tattered fur blanket. 'You're hakalika at *most*.'

'Ta'lak, don't...' Dena'cosa sighed. 'Don't say that.'

'Why? We're *all* hakalika,' Ta'lak replied. 'If we weren't we wouldn't be here. And if our yalfit wasn't completely ababhi in the most bwab ways, maybe I'd not have been born.'

'Ta'lak—'

'I know,' Ta'lak sighed. 'I'm sorry, Kekik. Maybe *I'm* ababhi.'

'I don't think you are,' Neg'an said, her voice as honest as she could make it. 'It's everyone else who are ababhi. Being mean on purpose— *That's* ababhi.'

'See? You're the smartest of us all! Hakalika at *most*,' Ta'lak snorted a laugh. Then she groaned and put a hand on her bulging stomach. 'Oh, I swear this berr has talons.'

Dena'cosa moved to her daughter's side. 'Pebble?'

'I'm fine, Kekik,' Ta'lak pushed her mother away. 'Just pregnant. I'll get over it in a month or two and it will be everyone else's problem, instead.'

'I worry about you,' Dena'cosa mumbled. 'You've always been a troubled one.'

'More troubled than Lah'kort?' Ta'lak challenged. When her mother sighed she shrugged and softened her tone. 'You know, the harpies he lent me to treated me better than he did. I hope we run out of food again soon.'

'Ta'lak!'

‘What? It’s a joke,’ Ta’lak rolled her eyes. ‘Mostly. They *did* treat me mip. Better than anyone here. If this berr *is* one of theirs I hope they want it —and me— back.’

‘Kay’oten doesn’t like tia’fio,’ Dena’cosa warned. ‘You know she kills any that are born.’

‘Yes, well, Pell’ti doesn’t give a dead spider’s shit about his berr being tia’fio,’ Ta’lak shrugged. ‘And I think even Kay’oten wouldn’t dare kill a half-harpy without checking with its yalfit first. And if she tries to then I’ll bash her head in with a rock or something. Oh, or I could always just stab Lah’kort!’

‘Ta’lak—’

‘Yes, Kekik, that’s my name. You don’t need to keep saying it,’ Ta’lak pushed herself to her feet and stretched. ‘Actually.... I’m going to go for a walk.’

‘Kay’oten said not to,’ Neg’an piped up. ‘She said anyone wandering around would be punished in the most mup way!’

‘Well, then, it’s a good thing I’m not going to *wander around*,’ Ta’lak snorted. ‘I know exactly where I’m heading— Don’t worry, kekik. I’ll be safe. Keep Neg’an warm for me.’

Dena’cosa sighed as her daughter pushed out of the shelter into the rain.

‘Kekik?’ Neg’an asked. ‘Aren’t you going to stop her?’

‘You know her, carrot,’ Dena’cosa sighed and pulled her youngest close. ‘It wouldn’t make any difference if I tried. She makes me so lenta, sometimes.... Come. Broja’kar. Let’s get some sleep.’

‘Okay,’ Neg’an mumbled as she was led to bed. She curled into her mother under the scrap of fur they used as a blanket and tried to keep warm.

She knew she was supposed to close her eyes... but she just couldn’t. She wasn’t sure how long she spent trying to sleep. But the rain was loud, and she was cold, and she was scared for Ka’harja, with his broken leg and bruised eye. It made it hard to sleep, even though her mother was snoring quietly beside her.

Maybe she could talk to Ta’lak about it when she came home. She might understand why Neg’an had let him go.

She could talk to Ta’lak, if Ta’lak came home before Lah’kort and Kay’oten.

But... she was taking a long time.

An awful long time. She’d never been out this long, before. She was usually back from her walks so quickly. It made Neg’an worry as the morning lights crept into the hole-filled hovel and she heard Kay’oten and the other Har’pies coming home from their search for Ka’harja.

They sounded like they were angry, too, which only made Neg’an more worried.

Had they found him?

It didn’t sound like it. They sounded too angry to have been successful—

‘DENA’COSA!’ Kay’oten screeched, bursting into the shelter and yanking Neg’an’s mother to her feet before she even had time to fully open her eyes. She threw the nurlak against the wall and hissed angrily.

Neg’an let out a terrified scream as her mother was dragged outside and thrown to the ground.

‘What— What’s going on?’ Dena’cosa cried. ‘I haven’t done anything—’

'What the hal'kata did you say to Ta'lak!' Kay'oten interrupted, advancing on the terrified woman.

'N-Nothing!' stammering, Dena'cosa tried to crawl away. 'I didn't say anything to her! Where— Where is she?'

'*GONE!*' Kay'oten screeched, kicking at the nurlak. 'That little kata'li is *gone!* But not before she—' She didn't finish her sentence, instead motioning to her side.

Neg'an followed Kay'oten's finger and gasped when she saw it.

Lah'kort was bleeding. His ear was torn and the side of his face was sliced open in a single, jagged line that looked painful and deep.

'Lah'kort!' Dena'cosa's cry was heartbroken as she struggled to her feet and attempted to comfort her son.

'Get off me, broja'kar!' Lah'kort hissed, pushing Dena'cosa to the ground. 'I don't need *your* help!'

'I told you!' Kay'oten grabbed Dena'cosa by the hair and yanked her into a kneel. 'I told you to keep your daughters under control!'

'I didn't— Know—' Dena'cosa gasped her lie. 'I didn't know she went out—'

Kay'oten let out a hiss and threw Dena'cosa down. 'Where's Neg'an?'

'I— I don't know—' she was cut off as Kay'oten hit her again.

'WHAT DO YOU MEAN YOU DON'T KNOW—'

'I'M HERE!' Neg'an cried, loud enough that her throat hurt. 'I stayed with her all night! I promise! She was watching me like she was meant to! Broja'nikar, na hurt her!'

Kay'oten growled as she turned and glared at Neg'an.

'Broja'nikar!' Neg'an dropped to her knees, bowing her head and holding up all four of her hands in a submissive gesture. 'Broja'nikar, na miita farfah kekik. I'm begging you! Broja'nikar. Do not hurt her!'

A hand closed around her wrist and she felt Kay'oten yank her viciously; though she didn't dare to disrespect her by standing.

'*What happened?*' the woman demanded, spitting in her anger. 'Did Ta'lak give you *any* indication she was going to do this?'

'Na,' Neg'an lied, shaking her head. She knew that Ta'lak *had* made it clear she wanted to do something— She'd said, just before she left, that she had wanted to stab Lah'kort. But Neg'an could never say that. It would make Kay'oten too angry, and she would blame Dena'cosa for it.... 'Na, she didn't. She went to sleep at the same time my kekik and I did. I don't know when she left. Kekik fell asleep, then I fell asleep. And when I woke up she was gone.'

For a long moment, Kay'oten stared at the trembling young child who stared back at her; eyes wide and heart beating fast as she struggled her raspy breaths. Then Kay'oten snorted and turned away.

'Go back to bed, the both of you,' she ordered. 'Dena'cosa, you're lucky your zelkin is too ababhi to lie. Because I didn't believe you for a second!'

Chapter End.

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