

Chapter 17:
Glif 12th, Firthda
Year 10,053 AE
(Coff's Caravan; Okatako)

The next morning was painful. Both physically and emotionally.

Ka'harja didn't want to get out of bed; but his mother didn't give him a choice. She was awake before him, a rare occurrence, and *thwopped* him with her pillow until he got the hint and moved his leg off her tail. She climbed over him like she was scaling a large rock and landed heavily on the floor.

'Where a-are you g-going?' Coff yawned into his book. 'You shouldn't b-be getting out of b-bed.'

'Well I'm gonna; unless you want me to shit on the floor!' Distro snapped back, cocking her head and pursing her lips as she met the healer's eye.

Coff flicked an ear and clicked his tongue. 'Ah. Um, alright. D-Don't wander off again though.'

Distro opened the door and the chill air hit Ka'harja like the horrible realities of the previous week flooding back to him. He tried to shake the thoughts out of his head as he sat up and wrapped his blanket around himself tightly in an attempt to conserve heat. He wished he'd worn more than his shorts to bed.

He glanced at Coff, sitting in his chair in nothing but his underwear and sleeveless undershirt, and shook his head. Something seemed off about the healer, but he couldn't put his finger on it. Something about the way he was sitting, maybe? With his feet on the table and his book in his lap?

Ka'harja sighed, trying to ignore whatever his head was telling him he missed, and licked his lips anxiously. 'Aren't you cold?'

'Mm? O-Oh no, I, uh, don't feel the c-cold too much,' Coff stammered. 'Actually I'm, um, a b-bit too hot. I'm— My pa was wolgen, so...'

'Oh, that explains your skin, then,' Ka'harja blurted. 'I was wondering why you were so pale. I mean, you're not as pale as my mum, of course. Her dad was wolgen, too.'

'Yeah, sh-she said,' an awkward quiet followed Coff's shrug, only broken by the boys outside *whooping* in excitement and shouting something at Distro. Coff bit his pencil as he turned around and leant his elbows on the back of his chair. 'Are *you* part wolgen? Your mother —your biological one— sh-she looked foxen, but you're a lot taller than her.'

'My parents were twins,' Ka'harja sucked the air through his teeth and grinned anxiously. 'I come from a long line of Har'pies.'

Coff looked away. 'I-I'm sorry, I d-didn't th-think about— Forgot— I'm s-s-sor—'

'It's fine,' Ka'harja told him, waving a hand dismissively. 'Forgetting is a good thing. I'm glad people don't look at me and think "Har'py" you know?'

Coff took a deep breath. 'It must b-be h-hard to have your her-heritage.'

'I like to think of myself as a Nigelle,' Ka'harja admitted. 'Kay'oten may be my *biological* mother, but Distro's my *real* mum. Besides, what's better than seven

generations of travelling prostitutes for grandmothers?’

Coff choked, covering his mouth so he didn't laugh. 'Seven g-generations?'

'At least seven; we have no idea how many more because the family history got lost in a raid when my great-great-great grandmother was travelling through Dohl.'

'Distro's family is from the Yali conti-tinent?' Coff gave an excited half-laugh. 'So's mine— The, uh, wolver side. My grandfather moved to Canis from, um, T-Turent!'

'We can trace our history back to Kutu,' Ka'harja grinned. 'If you follow mother-to-mother, that is. She also has some Gorut blood in her on one of her grandfather's sides, though it's... pretty far back.'

'W-Wow, they really *did* tr-travel,' Coff chuckled.

Ka'harja couldn't help grinning at him; without his anxieties, Coff held himself quite well. And it was nice to see his smile. It was an unusual one, with one gold tooth and another missing, but it was friendly— And it looked better on him than his wide-eyed anxiety. Seeing Coff relax made Ka'harja feel better about his own nervous thoughts. Like he could be like Coff, and calm himself down enough to enjoy himself.

'What abou-about your grandpa's s-side? Distro's father,' Coff asked. 'What.... What's he l-like?'

'Well, I've never actually *met* my granddad, but Mum said he raised her since she was six or seven,' he explained. Coff snickered as Ka'harja's tail began to wag and he slammed a hand down on it to try and stop it moving, feeling himself blush; he usually had good control over himself but talking about his grandfather always got him excited. 'Apparently he's rich. She told me why once but I can't remember what it was for the life of me.... He buys her literally everything she could ever want, even when she tells him not to. He sends me gifts, too. Though he doesn't seem to know much about me— But it's great that he cares about me enough to send me things! It's usually fancy clothes and jewellery —which you can probably tell I'm not into— but I keep it all anyway. I have an entire box of....'

Coff's smile disappeared as Ka'harja trailed off.

The break in his voice was enough to make the room feel colder and smaller than it had felt before. 'I mean.... I... *had*... an entire box of silken socks with floral patterns and dragons sewn into them....'

They sat in silence.

Then Ka'harja felt the tightness in his chest returning as his lower jaw began to tremble and gurgled sob escaped him before he burst into tears.

That was the exact moment that Distro kicked the door open.

'WHO WANTS SOME FUCKING SOUP?!' she exclaimed, her voice as rough as the door's squeaky hinges. 'I HAVE SEVEN BOWLS— Ka'harja? Sweetheart? Are you alright?'

He wasn't. He wasn't alright; nothing was alright! And nothing was going to be alright ever again!

'*I want to go home,*' he sobbed at the floor.

His mother hurriedly deposited her armful of bowls on Coff's desk and pulled her son into a hug. 'I know, Sweetheart. I do, too. But it's going to be okay.'

Ka'harja shook his head. 'How? We've lost everything!'

'We haven't lost each other,' Distro rasped, her already crackly voice breaking. 'We've lost a lot, but not *everything*.'

It didn't feel true. It felt like a lie, even though he knew it wasn't. They had no home anymore. What were they supposed to do? How could anything ever be okay again?

His mother's hand rubbed down his back and he felt himself let out a shudder. His brain knew she was right, but he couldn't convince himself to listen. He closed his eyes and tried to will away the sadness. He still had his mother. He hadn't lost her. Was he even allowed to be sad when he'd been lucky enough for her to survive? Or was he just *trying* to be upset?

'Once we get to Kokako Boaka, I'll write to my dad, okay?' Distro lifted her son's face so she could look him in the eye, and tenderly wiped away his tears. 'He'll send us some money so we can get settled. And we can start over again. It won't be the same living in town, I know, but who knows! It might be fun. We'll make new friends and go to bars and get drunk— And we can graffiti on people's letterboxes if we don't like them.'

Ka'harja felt a laugh escape him as his mother leant in close.

'*And imagine all the houses we can break into,*' she whispered so quietly he nearly missed it. '*All the new things we can steal.*'

Another laugh found its way through Ka'harja's sobs and he pulled away from his mother and wiped his nose on his arm.

She grabbed the crooked bridge between two fingers and shook his head side-to-side. 'Now, are you going to stop being a sook and eat breakfast, or do I have to give you another hug?'

Ka'harja couldn't help but giggle. He inhaled, deep and calming, and opened his arms for his mother. She squeezed him tightly and he felt his grief escape his body alongside his breath.

When they pulled away, Distro turned and grabbed a bowl of soup off Coff's workbench. She passed it to Ka'harja, who dipped a finger in. It had gotten cold while they'd talked, but it still smelt alright. He downed the bowl easily, and Distro passed him another.

'Coff? Aren't you going to eat?' Distro asked.

Coff shook his head. 'I ate b-before you got up.'

'More for me, then,' Ka'harja sniffed, downing his third bowl. 'What about you, Mum?'

'I had breakfast before coming back,' she grinned. 'That's why I took so long.'

'So you g-got him s-seven bowls to eat on his own?' Coff frowned. 'That's, um... a *lot*.'

'To be fair, one was for you,' Distro scoffed. 'And besides, if my boy's hungry he eats. I won't have it any other way!'

Coff shrugged and turned back to his work. 'D-Do you think you... I mean, uh...'

'Do I think I what?' Distro asked, stretching. 'Do I think I'm hot? Yeah. I know that's true.'

Ka'harja chuckled.

'I-I mean, do you think you'll need any, um, special a-adaptations in your m-

medication?' Coff bit his lip. 'Being, uh, h-half dragon?'

'Hopefully not,' Distro's smile disappeared and she sat next to her son. 'I might need a higher dose. *Maybe*. But that seems about it.'

Coff mumbled something as he continued his work. Then he swore. 'C-Can one of you help me?' he asked. 'I'm not, uh, used to fresh h-herbs. I-I usually get them dr-dried.'

'Ka'harja and I use fresh herbs all the time,' said Distro. 'Let me see them.'

Ka'harja watched his mother stand over the healer and point. 'The moon's leaf is fine, but the cortcor berries are a little under-ripe, see the orange colouration? Put them in some sugar-water until they're a brighter red.'

'W-Will that w-work?' amazed, Coff put the berries aside and wrote a quick note.

'For cortcor berries it does,' Ka'harja chimed in, leaning over the two and brushing some pale green berries away from the rest. 'Not for the julijun, though, the sugar makes them lose their potency. You need to pick them ripe or they're useless for anything but replanting.'

Coff nodded and scribbled down another note. 'Wh-What about the a-acorns? I'm not s-sure if they're o-okay or— Or if they're going bad.'

Ka'harja picked one up and bit into it. 'Tastes fine to me.'

The healer looked at him, horrified. 'You're n-not even go-going to...'

Ka'harja swallowed. 'Not going to what?'

'Shell them?'

Ka'harja frowned. 'You only shell them if you're using them for potions, I thought?'

Coff put his face in his hands and let out a long, pained sigh as Ka'harja ate the rest of the acorn, cap and all.

'He's like a squirrel,' Distro snickered.

'Squirrels do-don't eat the sh-shells,' Coff corrected. 'He's like a.... A....'

'Compost bin?'

'Hey, I'm right here, you know!' Ka'harja snapped playfully, finishing the last bowl of soup. 'Damn it.'

'Still hungry, bin-boy?' Distro asked. She grinned when Ka'harja nodded. 'There was a lot more leftover. I don't think anyone will mind if you have another bowl.'

'You— You just had s-seven bowls of soup!' Coff exclaimed. 'How are you st-still wanting m-more?'

Ka'harja shrugged. 'I always eat this much.'

Coff looked like he'd been struck. Then he shook his head. 'You must exercise a l-lot, th-then.'

'Nope,' Distro cackled. 'He's a lazy little shit.'

Another look of confusion and horror passed over Coff. 'Then how are you so... w-well, you're not exactly thin, but... how are you not.... *How?*'

Ka'harja shrugged. 'Probably the same reason I'm so tall.'

'And what reason's th-that?' asked Coff.

'Drank too many fucked up potions,' Ka'harja grinned. 'You know I burp pink mist sometimes!'

'You... burp pink mist?' Coff stared, open-mouthed, for what felt like a solid minute

before he pulled open a drawer and took out a notebook. 'Ka'harja, you *have* to let me study you! Pl-Please! This is insane! I've never met anyone so weird— I-I mean, not weird, uh... I mean... y-you're... v-very—'

'It's fine, I know I'm fucked up,' Ka'harja chuckled. 'Study away!'

Chapter End.

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