

Chapter 18: Glif 28th, Firthda Year 10,053 AE (The River; Okatako)

It was the first time since the fire that Ka'harja felt like things were actually getting better. His mother was recovering; the herbs they'd collected the fortnight before had done wonders to help her. Her voice hadn't sounded this clear in *years*. It was amazing, Ka'harja thought, that she sounded better now than before the fire.

Coff really knew what he was doing. Though the healer was nervous, he took his job seriously. He was just strict enough to keep Distro in line, without being too harsh and making her defy his orders out of spite. Several times Distro had tried to steal drinks or refused to take her medicine, and Ka'harja had walked in on Coff scolding her in a tone that almost put Koko to shame. Almost. Koko still beat Coff's stern voice whenever she was caught in her confusing relationship with Baku.

Ka'harja's thoughts jumped to the time he'd found the couple kissing by the river on their break; he'd bolted as soon as Koko had seen him, and her angry scream had made him feel like he'd aged five years—

His wandering mind was interrupted by a cold splash of water hitting him in the face. He shook himself for a moment, blinking the water out of his eyes and glaring at his mother.

'Oops,' she said in a tone so flat it made Ka'harja roll his eyes. 'Sorry, Ka, you were so spaced out... I mistook you for a log!'

Ka'harja wanted to splash her back, and wrestle, and push her head under the surface while she tugged on his ears and tried kicked him in the knees. But he fought against the urge. She was recovering, yes, but she wasn't better yet and the last thing she needed was to accidentally inhale the river.

Though it was tempting. Especially when she splashed him again and called him a coward.

'Ka'harja!' Stars' voice called over his mother's splashing, and he turned to see Stars running towards the river.

The exhaustion of her time in Heck'ne seemed to have disappeared since she'd joined the caravan; leaving an excited wonder as she explored the world around her with a zest Ka'harja could barely understand. Whenever Ka'harja saw her she was learning something new. Reading from Baku, cooking from Coborn. Sken was teaching her math, and she was even learning how to tend to the caravan's dragons with their grumpy old caretaker, Krarf.... She was a slow learner, but with the amount of new things for her to try it was a wonder she was able to take any of it in at all.

Dena, on the other hand, was another story. She trailed behind Stars slowly, carrying her grandson like he was the only thing keeping her from keeling over and dying where she stood. The bags under her eyes were dark; visible even from the distance between her and the river. She looked like she could collapse at any given moment and never get up again.

Stars began to strip when her mother finally caught up with her, then she leapt

thoughtlessly into the river beside Ka'harja. Dena shielded Little Demon from the splash before carefully putting him down and undressing herself. She lowered herself into the cold river and let out a sigh of relief, like the water had eased some sort of pain, and after a moment of quiet breathing she swam over to her daughter. Dena grabbed Stars' wrists to stop her playful splashing and tried to wash the patches of flour off her face.

Stars writhed in her mother's grasp before giving up and surrendering to the bath. 'I want to swim!' she protested.

'You can swim when you're clean,' Dena told her. 'Look at you! How did you get yourself so dirty?'

Stars quickly looked down at herself and sighed. 'I was just helping Coborn cook lunch.'

'How— Broja'kar na bakti, Stars! Sit still.' Dena gave a huff as she continued to wash her disobedient daughter, who didn't stop fidgeting until she was finally let go.

As soon as Dena had let her go Stars swam to the river's opposite bank and dropped down into the water, so only half her face was visible as she blew frustrated bubbles.

Dena just shook her head and gave a tired smile as Distro paddled over.

'Someone's in a mood,' she chuckled. 'Do you need a hand washing yourself?'

'Na. I'm alright,' Dena sighed, her smile fading. 'I'm not as dirty as I am hungry. I might get out and get something to eat.'

'I'll join you,' offered Distro, swimming to the riverbank. 'Ka'harja can watch Stars, can't you?'

'Sure,' Ka'harja nodded. 'I'll make sure she doesn't roll in the mud. Or, if she does, I'll make sure she washes it off afterwards!'

Dena tried to glare at him, but she was too tired to hold it and let out a breath as Distro helped her out of the water. 'Just make sure she doesn't get miita.'

'She'll be fine,' said Distro. She began to stretch as Dena dried and dressed herself.

'You gonna get dressed?' Ka'harja scoffed. 'Or at least dry off?'

'Nah, I'm alright!' Distro grinned, starting back towards the camp. 'I'll just drip-dry. If anyone has a problem with it they can throw a towel over me themselves.'

Ka'harja watched the two mothers leave with Little Demon. They talked happily between themselves, like old friends who'd known each other for years, and Ka'harja felt frustrated that Dena and his mother had bonded so quickly in the past few weeks. Especially when he considered the cold looks Dena gave him.

He shook his head. It wasn't Dena's fault; she'd lived with Kay'oten for... who knows how long? He could only imagine what she saw when she looked at him. He thought it must be for her like it was for him when he was young and first saw himself in a mirror.... That horrible, familiar face that wasn't quite his parents' but close enough to make him feel sick.

He sighed. He just had to be patient with Dena until she saw him as himself, and not a reminder of the Heck'ne.

'That's not fair,' Stars mumbled, swimming up next to Ka'harja. 'Everyone gets to be naked except for me. He'hen.'

'You're naked now,' he pointed out.

Stars looked herself over, seeming to realise for the first time since getting in the river that she was completely nude. 'Oh. I am.... Gighi! So are you! It's like when we met!'

Ka'harja tried to smother his giggle, but failed. 'I'm going to keep washing; you should go for that swim you wanted.'

'Yi! I will!' Stars beamed. 'But, I have a question I want to ask you, first.'

'Yeah?'

'Am I speaking better?'

Ka'harja cocked his head. 'What do you mean?'

'International,' she clarified. 'Am I speaking International better? I'm trying to stop speaking Har'py so much, because it makes me think of mup times. Baku has been helping me learn but it's very hard. Am I getting better?'

'Yeah, I'd say so,' Ka'harja gave a nod. 'You've improved a lot!'

A wide grin spread over Stars' face before she turned and began to splash through the river. Ka'harja watched as she chased a lone leaf downstream— And laughed when she turned around to search for a fish that surfaced and disappeared in an instant.

She wasn't a very good swimmer. She was too thin to be buoyant, and she didn't know what to do with all her arms; but Ka'harja couldn't help being impressed by her effort as she paddled around, following anything that caught her attention.

His heart nearly stopped when she submerged— But she resurfaced close to him with a cheeky grin and he rolled his eyes at her.

'Don't scare me like that,' he told her. 'Warn me if you're going to dive—'

He cut off as Stars squirted her mouthful of water into his face. She dove out of view before Ka'harja had time to react and resurfaced behind him, spraying him again when he turned to complain.

'That's it!' Ka'harja laughed, chasing her through the water. 'When I catch you, you're going to get it!'

Stars finally found a use for her extra limbs; she was able to splash and swim at the same time, much to Ka'harja's amusement. She threw water at him as he followed her from bank to bank, only stopping when Ka'harja took a deep breath and disappeared below the surface.

'Ka'harja?' Stars mumbled. 'Where'd you go— *OOOOH NOOO! NO!*'

Ka'harja came up underneath her, lifting her on his shoulders and falling backwards into the water as she shrieked joyfully.

They surfaced again and Stars began to pummel Ka'harja with splashes. He covered his face and tried to swim around her, but she was relentless.

'*GET IT AWAY FROM ME!*'

Ka'harja paused when he heard the shout, and motioned for Stars to stop. She didn't realise, at first, but stopped when Ka'harja waved his hand again and pricked up his ears to listen to the ruckus back at camp.

'Scara in the High-World! Kill it! KILL IT!'

Ka'harja leapt out of the river and tugged on his shorts, not bothering to dry himself off. Stars didn't get dressed at all as she followed him back to the caravans.

'I'm *trying* to get it!' Trat exclaimed over the other anxious voices. There was a

metallic clang and a scream before Trat shouted again. 'IT WON'T— STOP MOVING! STAY! STILL!'

Ka'harja turned the corner just as Naranako let out another one of his kettle-screams and jumped onto Felelor's back. Felelor tried to shake him off, but the terrified man clung to him like his life depended on it, and Felelor ended up nearly falling over. He bumped into Trat, who righted him and retreated a few steps away from the centre of the action until he was standing next to a frustrated Sken, who hid a terrified Annanyn behind her and tugged on Tucker's collar to stop him sprinting forward.

'Just kill it!' Sken exclaimed, struggling with her incarrah. 'Squash it! For the love of Scara don't try to catch it! KILL IT!'

Ka'harja couldn't quite see what she was telling them to squash— OH GREAT STAR! A *SLIME!*

Ka'harja backed up so far he collided with Stars and nearly tumbled down the hill. He must have let out a shout because Distro looked at him from the other side of camp and shook her head; she looked utterly disgusted by the green sludge-beast that was jumping frantically around the campfire.

'Be careful, Ka'harja! You nearly made me fall over!' Stars shoved Ka'harja forward just as Baku and Coff rushed past. Both of the boys were almost in tears with fear.

Coff grabbed ahold of Ka'harja and hid behind him while Baku shot up the side of one of the caravans; screaming like he was fleeing a pride of rampaging sabre cats.

'It's really flakha,' Stars commented. 'It's almost as big as Tucker.'

Ka'harja nearly threw up as he watched the large, gelatinous blob leap around camp, trailed by Lif and Coborn. The pair wielded a large cooking pot between them, which they tried to throw over the slime several times— Never even getting close to actually catching it.

'Get out of the way!' Koko shrieked, drawing an arrow into her bow. 'I'm going to shoot this fucker in the face!'

'That won't work!' a new voice called. Ka'harja was almost amazed to hear it; he'd never heard the animal caretaker speak before, let alone shout. He wasn't even fully sure Krarf was able to *speak* until now. He'd forgotten about the old man, actually. 'Slimes don't have faces! Or organs! Or anything that can be hurt by arrows— Just leave it alone! ALL OF YOU! It'll leave if you stop making it panic!'

'KILL IT!' Naranako shrieked from on top of Felelor. 'KILL IT BEFORE IT BITES SOMEONE!'

'IT'S GOT NO TEETH!' Krarf screeched back. 'JUST LEAVE IT ALONE!'

Ka'harja felt his stomach heave as the slime jumped towards Coborn, who shrieked and smacked it away with the oversized pot. It bounced along the ground heavily before colliding with a caravan and falling still.

'What is it?' Stars asked. 'Is it zi'kaf?'

'It's a slime,' Ka'harja managed to look away from the quivering form of the slime long enough to look Stars in the eye. 'They're gross and— And some are venomous and— OH GREAT STAR NO! STOP! NO!'

If it hadn't been for Coff fleeing, Ka'harja wouldn't have thought to look back at the slime— When he did, he saw it coming directly for him at a speed he'd never guessed

something without legs would be able to go.

He stumbled backwards and bumped into a chair and, without thinking, grabbed it and swung it at the slime. Then he swung it again, for good measure. And again. And again. And again. He screamed and swung the chair again. Then he screamed some more, and swung the chair a few times over, until all that remained was a puddle and half a wooden leg.

'KA'HARJA! I'M *PRETTY SURE* IT'S DEAD NOW!' Sken exclaimed, putting her face in her hands. 'You can stop destroying my furniture!'

Ka'harja smacked the chair leg into the green puddle again, just to make sure, before jumping back. He didn't dare put the leg down and brandished his makeshift club above his head; terrified the slime would leap back up at him.

'It was a common grass slime,' Krarf groaned over the puddle. 'They're not dangerous at all... They're good for the ecosystem....'

Ka'harja felt something touch his leg and jumped back; nearly swinging his club at his mother.

'That was bit excessive, don't you think?' Distro pursed her lips and shook her head.

'IT WAS COMING RIGHT AT ME!' Ka'harja didn't mean to shout, but he couldn't stop his heart from trying to escape through his mouth. 'DID YOU SEE IT? IT WAS GOING TO KILL ME!'

'Put the.... Put the piece of wood down Ka'harja, before you hurt someone,' Distro held out her hand, and Ka'harja anxiously passed the splintered leg to her.

Just as he did Naranako collided with him, grabbing him in a hug and kissing him firmly on the cheek. Tucker began leaping around them, barking as excitedly as the man clinging to Ka'harja squealed.

'Ka'harja! You saved us!' Naranako cheered, kissing him again. 'You're a hero, Ka'harja! You saved us all from that monster!'

'Some guard you are,' Felelor grumbled, peeling his nephew off Ka'harja's side. 'You're such a coward, Naranako. Get a hold of yourself, would you? You're embarrassing to be related to.'

'I hope you're going to clean this up?' Sken cut in, shooing Tucker away. 'There's slime everywhere— For Scara's sake, you put out the campfire!'

Ka'harja glanced around. She was right; there was slime everywhere. The caravans and the caravaners alike were coated in thick, lumpy goo. He took a deep breath. 'Well... seeing as I was the one who killed it, I don't think I should have to clean it up?'

'I'm not doing it!' Naranako exclaimed, fleeing towards the river. 'NO! YOU CAN'T MAKE ME!'

Felelor gave an angry shout and made after him. 'NARANAKO YOU TURD!'

The other caravaners backed away anxiously, leaving Ka'harja, Stars, and Distro standing together by the puddle of slime; which Krarf was still groaning over.

'I'll help,' Stars said gently. 'I already have it all on me.'

'So will I,' Distro grinned. 'I'm not scared of a little slime—'

'No,' Coff cut in. 'Y-You should go back to bed and, uh, get s-some rest... and... you should prob-probably also p-put on some... clothes.'

'I don't need rest!' she pouted. 'And I certainly don't need clothes!'

'You kn-know I won't l-leave you alone until you l-listen to me,' Coff pressed, fumbling over his words as he stared Distro down. 'So d-do as I s-say or-or I'll— Uh—'

Ka'harja was going to say something, but his attention was drawn from the argument as Sken pulled off her jacket and threw it over Stars' shoulders.

'But won't it get slimy? I'm all slimed,' Stars asked as Sken tugged it around her tightly, doing up the first few buttons.

'It needs a clean anyway,' she replied. 'It's more important that you stay warm.'

'But it'll get slime on it,' repeated Stars.

'It's already gooey enough from me,' Sken comforted. 'A little bit more won't hurt it.'

Stars looked reluctant, but let Sken put the jacket around her anyway. It was a size too big, and didn't have enough arm holes for the poor girl, but it was thick and would keep her from getting sick in the cold weather.

Coff nudged Ka'harja gently, and Ka'harja turned to see him alone and anxious— His short hair messed up like Distro had tried to put him in a headlock.

'You alright?' Ka'harja asked.

'Y-Your m-mother is, um, s-something alr-right,' sighed Coff, rubbing his arm, which was starting to bruise; Ka'harja made a mental note to scold his mother later. Coff caught his gaze and shrugged. 'Sh-She was being playful. I think.... She's p-promised to go to bed for a wh-while, at least.'

'Thank the Ninth god,' chuckled Ka'harja. 'You're not going to watch her?'

'Dena's gone with her an-and I, uh, w-want to help c-clean up,' Coff said. 'And m-maybe get a b-bit of the— The slime. If we can, uh, find an uncontaminated patch. Th-They can be good for pre-preserving things.'

'Oh. Sure,' Ka'harja nodded, then glanced around.

There weren't many people still here. It was just Stars, Coff, Koko, Krarf (though he wasn't sure Krarf would be willing to help clean, as he was still crying over the puddle of goop), and himself. Well, there was Baku, but he was hiding on the roof and pretending he wasn't there. Ka'harja wasn't sure whether to call him down or not—

'BAKU!' Koko shouted, making the decision for him. 'Get down here and help or I'll boot you up the arse!'

'*He'd p-probably enjoy that,*' Coff muttered, rubbing his hands together anxiously.

Ka'harja had to hold back a laugh; he was right. Baku seemed to enjoy brawling with Koko more than anyone should enjoy a fight, but he'd always figured it was just how they bonded. Like he and his mother did when they armed themselves with logs and hit rocks at each other.... He hadn't realised it was unusual by the rest of the caravan's standards until someone had mentioned it.

'Baku! Don't make me climb up there and get you!' Koko continued. 'I'll tug you down by your tail and hang you with the wet clothes if you don't clean up!'

'It's slippery!' Baku complained. 'If I try and get down I'll fall!'

'What if I throw a cloth up for you?' Koko suggested. And, though she rolled her eyes, her voice softened. 'Then you can clean the top of the caravans! Needs to be done anyway.'

Baku looked reluctant, but slowly nodded. He wouldn't dare disagree with Koko—
Though, who would?

Ka'harja shifted from foot to foot as Felelor dragged Naranako back into the camp and Koko began shouting orders at them.

He didn't know what to do.

Sure, he'd made the mess, but nobody else had done anything about the slime—
Well, except Coborn and Lif. They'd actually tried to capture it. He should have left them to it, then he wouldn't be here.... Where were they, anyway? He'd seen Trat helping Sken with Tucker, but he hadn't seen where Lif went. And he was almost always by Trat's side. And Coborn! She wasn't the sort to run off like this; from what he'd seen of her she was more than happy to help clean up. Even the grossest things, like changing Little Demon. She always jumped at the chance to help with that.

Ka'harja sighed and shook his head. She was probably shaken up and needed to sit down.

'You alright there?'

Ka'harja jumped as Koko turned to him, and gave a short, anxious nod. 'F-Fine. Sorry about the mess.'

'Nah, at least you actually did something,' Koko grinned, tipping her head slightly and flicking her ears playfully. 'You were braver than the people we pay to be brave. How's that for irony?'

He couldn't help but laugh. It *was* ironic, especially considering he'd been terrified the entire time. He'd never been brave in his life. Honestly; the bravest thing he could ever recall doing was sneaking into the kitchen when he was fourteen and switching all the alcohol out for bottles filled with skunk's blood. And he only remembered that because his mother had made him drink a cup when she'd found out what he'd done.

It hadn't tasted as bad as he'd thought it would.

'You're right, I don't think he's with us anymore,' Koko snickered, jabbing Ka'harja in the leg and bringing him out of his daydream. 'There we go! Back on Demrefor with us now? Or are you still in the clouds with your brain? Tall enough for it.'

Ka'harja gave his head a shake and glanced around the caravaners. 'Sorry, what were we talking about?'

'I was saying you can help Coff,' said Koko. 'And once you two are done you can have a break. You look like you need it.'

Nodding, Ka'harja rubbed his arm and followed Coff obediently. He wasn't ready to argue with Koko. The adrenaline had worn off and he just wanted to curl up and sleep. But instead he and the healer made their way around the camp, poking at the puddles of slime that were splattered around until Coff found a pool of clean green liquid and started scooping it into a jar.

Unsure how to help, Ka'harja just watched as Coff filled the jar halfway before moving to another pile of goo.

The silence felt... awkward, so Ka'harja tried to make conversation. 'What's with you and Baku?'

'Ho— What do you m-mean?' stammered Coff. 'No-Nothing's with us?'

'He's always teasing you,' Ka'harja clarified. 'He seems to know how to push your

buttons— And he seems to like doing it.’

‘Oh, th-that,’ Coff relaxed, though he blushed deeply as he spoke. ‘Our pa-pa-pa— Our parents sent us to th-the same tutors to save money. He’s a b-bit like a br-br-brother to me.’

‘That explains all the inside jokes.’

‘Y-Yeah,’ Coff chuckled. ‘He knows all o-of my s-secrets... and I, um, I know a-all of his. I tr-trust him with them, though. I mean, uh, he p-punched my ex-girl-girl-gir— My ex-girlfriend so hard he br-broke her j-jaw, so I know he’ll stick up for me when I— When I need it.’

‘Ouch, impressive,’ Ka’harja bit his lip. He wondered why Coff’s ex needed that sort of treatment, but figured it wasn’t his business. Besides, if Baku hit her that hard she probably deserved it. Baku didn’t even hit *Koko* that hard, and she seemed to like it.

‘V-Very impr-impressive,’ Coff managed. ‘I mentioned it to Sk-Sken when she was hiring me —j-just an offhand comment— and, uh, that’s why she thought he’d m-make a g-good guard. I didn’t argue. Baku needed the j-job and... he’s my best friend. It’s b-been nice to have him around.’

‘And he got to meet Koko,’ Ka’harja joked. ‘I’m sure he gives you credit for losing his virginity, too.’

Coff laughed loudly, then covered his mouth and blushed so red he looked like he couldn’t breathe.

‘Oh jeez, you alright?’

Coff nodded. ‘F-Fine. I don’t— I don’t— I don’t— I h-have idea wh-what that was.’

‘It was a laugh,’ replied Ka’harja. ‘You never laughed like that before?’

‘No— Not since I was a-a kid,’ he admitted. Then he glanced around, twitching his ears anxiously and listening for something before leaning in close to Ka’harja and whispering, ‘*He’s st-still a virgin.*’

Ka’harja nearly threw up he laughed so hard.

‘D-Don’t tell him I t-told you!’ Coff stammered. ‘Pl-Please. He’d never for-forgive me— Well, uh, he probably w-would— Actually he p-probably wou-wouldn’t care that you know. Koko— Koko would care. Don’t tell K-Koko.’

Ka’harja nodded, biting his lip. ‘What about you? Are *you* a virgin?’

Coff flushed bright red and looked away, not answering and instead asking, ‘Are y-you?’

‘Nope,’ Ka’harja chuckled. ‘I’ve fucked at least seven guys. Maybe eight? I can’t remember. I had a notebook with their names but I... guess that’s gone now.’

Coff nodded. ‘I... sl-slept with my ex a few times. Wasn’t ex-exactly... the n-nicest. She was, uh, a b-bit forceful.’

‘Oh,’ Ka’harja’s heart dropped and he scratched his arm nervously. ‘That sucks. I’m sorry to hear that.’

‘I— Uh, it’s f-fine,’ Coff rubbed the back of his head before screwing the now-full jar of slime shut. ‘Baku— He helped.’

It was awkward. Ka’harja hadn’t expected the conversation to take this turn and he wasn’t sure how to respond— Luckily he didn’t have to. He heard Baku let out a shriek and turned to see Stars fling a second handful of slime at him, laughing as she did.

Then Koko threw a bucket of water over Stars and immediately fell over as Felelor flung his wet cloth at her with such force that Ka'harja heard the *sthwupt* sound from where he knelt with Coff.

'I don't think I've ever seen Koko play around like that before,' Ka'harja joked, pushing himself to his feet. 'Let's get out of here before they throw shit at us, too.'

Coff nodded and the two boys made their way to the river to clean themselves off.

They passed Coborn and Lif as they went; Coborn looked like she'd been crying, and Ka'harja suddenly felt very sorry for her as Lif quietly led her back to the caravans.

When he got to the water Ka'harja leapt in, not bothering to take his already-soaked shorts off, and watched as Coff put his things down and slowly stripped. He... wasn't what Ka'harja expected him to look like. Ka'harja blinked; he couldn't take his eyes off Coff as he got undressed. He was almost disappointed when Coff didn't take off his underwear before climbing into the water. Then he caught himself and turned away.

Trying to clear his mind, Ka'harja dunked his head under the surface and shook it. He was *not* attracted to Coff.

Was he?

NO!

He shook his head again and resurfaced. He was fine. Absolutely fine and not attracted to someone he barely knew but seemed to have everything in common with—

'A-Are you okay?' Coff asked, raising his brow. 'The water's not *th-that* cold, i-is it?'

I wish it was, thought Ka'harja. 'No, no, it's fine. I'm just— Uh, washing my hair?'

For a moment, there was silence as Coff stared at Ka'harja in disbelief. 'R.... Okay? That was.... Yes. Of course.'

'So you have a *lot* of body hair!' Ka'harja blurted. 'How'd that happen? Puberty punch you in the face or what?'

'Ac-Actually, my pa was wolv-wolven,' said Coff. 'I think I, uh, may— I may have mentioned it before? M-Maybe not.'

'Oh— No. Yeah. I think I remember you saying something about that,' Ka'harja felt himself blush. He was *stupid*. 'Yes. You definitely said something about it before. Sorry, I didn't mean to be so forgetful.'

'It's fine,' replied Coff, rubbing his fluffy chest roughly. 'Uh, could you— Help? I can't g-get this out on my own.'

A confused mix of emotions shot through Ka'harja. He wanted to help wash it off — oh Great Star did he ever want an excuse to touch Coff right now— but he also didn't... want to let on to Coff that he was attracted to him. Not when he wasn't sure *how* attracted to him he was. And especially now he knew about Coff's ex-girlfriend.

Why are all the cute ones straight? Ka'harja held back his sigh and swum around Coff so he could rub his back; gentle up and down motions to loosen what was left of the slime.

'Wh-What was your father l-like?' Coff asked.

'My father?' for a moment, Ka'harja hesitated. 'He... was Kay'oten's brother. I think I may have said before that they were twins? Either way, he used to beat me a lot. Sometimes pick me up by my tail and throw me around.... Wasn't a good guy.'

'Oh— Oh,' Coff rubbed his cheek and looked away. 'So-Sorry I as-asked.'
'It's fine,' sighed Ka'harja. 'It's barely a memory now.'
'St-Still,' Coff sighed. 'That... doesn't sound like a— Like a f-fun childhood.'
'It wasn't,' Ka'harja admitted. 'But, hey, meeting Mum made it worth it.'
Coff gave Ka'harja a weak smile and turned around. 'Thanks f-for g-getting my back.'

'No problem.'
'I'll do you, n-now?'
What? Ka'harja froze. *Do me?*
'Your back?' Coff clarified. 'Wh-What did you think I m-meant?'
'Nothing— I just don't need help washing myself,' he lied. 'You can go now.'
'Oh— Uh, okay,' dejected, Coff swum to the riverbank and pulled himself out. 'I'll, uh, see you l-later?'

'Yes, okay. Buh-bye!' Ka'harja blurted in a ruder tone than he intended. He tried to wave goodbye as Coff made his way back to the caravans, but it just looked like he was mocking the healer.

After he lost sight of Coff, Ka'harja slapped himself in the face.
'IDIOT!'

Chapter End.

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