

Chapter 20: Glif 29th, Minda Year 10,053 AE (A Wedding Venue; An Unfamiliar City?)

It was his wedding day? How did that happen?

Never-mind! Who cared! Ka'harja couldn't believe the day had finally come! He was so excited to be getting married to the love of his life!

He smiled, pulling the carefully painted wedding-egg out of his tail fur, and cracked it with the side of his spoon.

'Hello, my love,' he greeted as he pulled apart the shell and carefully tipped the tiny man on top of the wedding cake. 'Today's the day.'

Coff sat down, putting his hands in his lap as he shook his head. 'Wrong. Tomorrow.'

'Tomorrow?' Ka'harja echoed. 'But tomorrow never comes.'

'Exactly,' Coff said calmly as he slowly sunk into the cake's thick icing. 'Goodbye.'

Ka'harja snorted awake with a start and groaned, rubbing his eyes and rolling over in bed. *'What the fuck.'*

'Morning, sleepyhead!' Distro called cheerily. 'You slept in longer than I did. It's a miracle! I say we have a party with lots of alcohol that I'm *absolutely* allowed to drink because Coff told me it was fine last night while you were asleep.'

'As long as there's no cake,' Ka'harja groaned, pushing himself up and yawning. He moved Coff's tail off his own as he sat up and glanced at the sleeping healer. 'I've had enough cake.'

'What?' Distro asked with a chuckle. 'Sweetheart? Are you alright?'

'Oh, nothing, just a dream,' Ka'harja stretched and felt his spine *click* into place. 'Did you dream last night?'

'Yeah, about my mum— First one, not my stepmother,' Distro told him. 'Why, did you dream it too?'

He shook his head. 'No. I had a different dream.'

'That's weird,' Distro chuckled. 'Maybe this dragon thing's messed up more than just my face.'

'No, I think it was me,' Ka'harja laughed. 'I had a dream about Coff.'

'Ooh, someone has a *crush!*' Distro snickered. 'Don't say it too loud though, you might wake him.'

Ka'harja glanced to his side and looked to Coff, asleep at his workbench; his face pressed against a scroll and his hand gripping a pen. Ingredients were scattered in an unorganised mess across the table and floor, and a heavy looking book lay open at his feet. Curious, Ka'harja glanced at the page and saw the smallest text he'd ever seen, and lots of math. He opted to ignore its existence and slid out of bed, wiped his face with his sleeve, and stared at the exhausted healer. He felt bad for Coff; he'd worked himself to the point of exhaustion and didn't look very comfortable.

'Do you think he's alright?' Ka'harja sniffed, stifling his yawn.

'You know he always sleeps like that,' Distro shrugged. 'He might as well only have one bed in here; it's not like he ever uses his.'

Ka'harja sighed and picked up the smaller man. He was surprisingly light —lighter than Distro— and Ka'harja had no problem tucking him into the still-warm bed. The healer groaned when Ka'harja pulled the blanket over him and buried his face into his pillow. *'Tomorrow.... I'll tell him....'*

'He's dreaming about something good,' chuckled Ka'harja, dropping Coff's pen back onto the table and heading for the door. 'I'll bring you back some breakfast once I've eaten.'

'You better!' Distro teased. 'Or I'll chop you up and eat *you!*'

'You'll have to catch me first, little legs!' Ka'harja replied as he slipped out of the room. He shook his head as his mother began shouting responses through the door and couldn't help grinning. He loved his mother, warts and all— No, *scales* and all!

'You're in a good mood, friend!' Baku asked as he passed. 'What's got you laughing like that?'

Ka'harja nodded to the caravan door and watched as Baku listened carefully.

'I'll start with the brain!' Distro exclaimed. *'Boil it and turn it into stock to flavour the rest of you! Then I'll roast your arms and mince your legs and—'*

'By the Goddess,' chuckled Baku. 'Is she yelling at you or Coff?'

'Oh, just me,' Ka'harja replied. 'If she was yelling at Coff it would be more along the lines of "if you don't give me a drink I'll drink your blood instead!" You know, fun stuff.'

'Sounds like a party,' Baku said with a grin. 'Well, I just got off night shift with Koko so I'm going to go get some sleep.'

'I'll leave you to it,' Ka'harja gave a nod to dismiss Baku, who waved happily and headed into the caravan Ka'harja had tried to sleep in the night before. *And thank you for letting me know how bad a mood Koko's going to be in today.*

With that thought, Ka'harja turned on his heels and headed toward the burnt-out fire where Coborn was gathering the dirty dishes. He glanced around at everyone to get his bearings.

He saw Stars and Dena by the fire together, feeding Little Demon, and sitting only a little bit away from them Felelor was trying to eat. He was having trouble because Naranako was clinging to his arm chattering like a child as Trat and Lif encouraged him. The two men were giving impish glances to Felelor, whose own look was like an omen of death to come.

Ka'harja tried to remember how Felelor and Naranako were related.... Brothers? Cousins? Oh— *Right!* Felelor had said something about his sister being Naranako's mother.

Or was it the other way around and Naranako's sister was Felelor's mother?

'Naranako I'm going to slap you so hard you'll end up an inch taller!' Felelor growled as Naranako gave him an excited shake and he spilt his soup. 'I swear to the Goddess, Naranako! Spill my soup one more time! I dare you! I'll make you regret being born!'

No, he was right the first time. Felelor was *definitely* the uncle.

Distracted by the boys, Ka'harja nearly tripped on Koko. He saw her at the last

minute and froze at her side; his foot dangerously close to her tail as she slept on the damp ground, wrapped up in her sleeping bag with Tucker flopped over her legs.

She must be exhausted, Ka'harja thought to himself, stepping over her and Tucker.

The incarah gave a heavy sigh, squealing through his gills and licking his slimy lips as Ka'harja passed.

'Yeah, me too boy,' Ka'harja mumbled to the fish-dog before heading towards Coborn. He wasn't sure what to say, but remembered his conversation with Stars the night before and so gave her the brightest smile he could manage. 'Morning, Coborn! Smells really nice today!'

He wasn't lying, either. It smelt *amazing*. Maybe he was just hungry, but something about her cooking seemed more appealing than it ever had before.

'Thanks,' half-smiling, and pushing her hair out of her eyes, Coborn glanced to Coff's caravan and bit her lip. 'You... spent the night with Coff?'

Ka'harja shrugged, trying not to blush at the thought of the healer. 'It was more that I spent the night with my mum.'

'Oh...' she sounded almost disappointed. 'You know I used to share a room with him? Before he got me a job with Sken, that is.'

'Did you two... date?' Ka'harja didn't mean to sound so shocked, but he couldn't imagine either of them getting up the courage to make the first move and get into a relationship.... Was Coborn the ex Baku had punched in the face? *But why would Baku hit Coborn?*

'No! Oh, *Goddess* no!' a look of disgust passed over Coborn's face, as if Ka'harja had implied she'd dated a family member; then she realised the tone she'd used and blushed deeply, anxiously starting to work her hand over her collarbone the way Ka'harja had seen her do many times before. He still never got a good look at her tattoo. 'I met his ex, though. She was... uh.... Well if you need to know what she was like, she threw a vase at me once.'

'Great Star, really?' Ka'harja gasped.

'Knocked me out,' Coborn said, putting her hand on the side of her head as if remembering the collision. 'But— Uh, that's not the point. We were talking about how I used to live with Coff?'

Ka'harja got the hint, and let her change the topic. 'How'd that happen?'

'I was dismissed from my apprenticeship in the La'Can royal kitchens. A lot of people lost their jobs, including Coff's mother. She'd been training me and, well, I couldn't afford to move back to Tyali so she let me stay with her. I spent a while on their couch before Coff let me use his bed —you know how he always falls asleep at his desk— and I stayed with the family for a few... uh....'

'A few weeks?' Ka'harja offered.

'Years,' Coborn corrected, her cheeks darkening in a blush. 'About two years.'

'How... old were you?' Ka'harja asked.

'Twelve,' Coborn looked away, and rubbed her collar even more vigorously. 'I was fourteen when I started working for Sken.'

'Wow,' Ka'harja breathed. 'That's pretty young.'

'Yeah,' Coborn gave a weak smile and scooped a bowl of soup for Ka'harja. 'I think

I've done most of my learning here with her. Seces dishes are... interesting, to say the least. Nothing like wolver food, that's for sure. And certainly not like anything foxen! You can't deep fry salmon eggs. At least not easily.'

Ka'harja felt himself laugh as he took the chunky vegetable mix from Coborn and gave it a quick stir. 'Thanks for this.'

Coborn gave him a thankful smile. 'No— Thanks for talking with me. I get so busy sometimes I forget to be social. Sorry it was a bit awkward.'

'I know the feeling,' he chuckled, giving her a nod. 'See you later.'

Ka'harja was glad he'd had the conversation. He hadn't even realised he'd been stressed until after he'd relaxed. Now he could just sit and eat.

Though... there wasn't much space to sit; most of the ground was too damp, and the few spots that weren't too wet were already taken.

Ka'harja glanced around dumbly before catching sight of Sken, who gave him a wave and patted the log she sat on. Not wanting to be rude Ka'harja walked over and sat with her.

'Morning,' Sken gave Ka'harja a friendly slap on the back, nearly making him spill his food. 'You're up pretty late in the day— And listening to your mother, she's gotten up early! For her, at least. It's still pretty late for a normal person to be getting up.'

'True,' Ka'harja chuckled, his voice quieter than he meant it to be.

Sken paused for a moment and looked at him expectantly, as if she realised he had something to say.

He hadn't meant to sound that way, but it was true. He wanted to talk to someone about his feelings for Coff. Someone who wasn't a childhood friend— Who wouldn't tell Coff about it.... He hadn't intended to talk to Sken but... she'd understand. Maybe....

'Well, uh—'

Before he could get the words out of his mouth, Annanyn plopped herself between the pair and offered them both fish from her complicated-looking platter. As she turned to Ka'harja her face pulled in a grimace. 'What's that smell?'

'What smell?' Sken asked.

'Smells like mouldy cloth,' Annanyn muttered, sniffing at the air. 'I think someone's cast magic here recently.'

'What?' Ka'harja laughed. 'What are you talking about?'

Annanyn was too busy sniffing to respond, so Sken answered for her. 'She's an aura sensor. She can smell magic.'

'Smell magic?' Ka'harja echoed. 'I though aura sensors... sensed magic.'

'Smell is a sense,' Sken scoffed, rolling her eyes and grinning playfully. 'Every aura sensor is different. Annanyn smells it.... What sort of magic is it, puddle-hopper?'

Annanyn shrugged. 'I think it's some sort of dream magic, but it's too weak to tell. Probably just wafted over from somewhere else.'

'You sure?' Sken asked.

Annanyn nodded, and began to scoff food from her platter. 'Oh Goddess, Coborn's so good at cooking!'

Ka'harja didn't agree; she was mediocre at best.... But then, he wasn't the one who hired her. Sken had hired her— And even though Sken obviously wasn't a fan of her

food, it was clear to see why. Just looking at Annanyn's satisfied face every mealtime almost made his own heart melt. And he was gay. Very very gay.

Great Star, Coff was beautiful.

'Ka'harja?' Sken's voice wafted gently over her wife's head. 'You had something to say?'

'Oh, no, it's fine,' giving an anxious chuckle, Ka'harja shrugged. 'It's nothing.'

'If you're sure...' slowly, Sken trailed off. She put an arm around Annanyn and the three sat in silence for a moment before Annanyn grabbed a slice of banana off her plate and stuck it on her forehead.

'I'm Banananyn,' she stated. 'Banananyn Bunana.'

Ka'harja stared as Sken let out her usual ear-piercing laugh and wiped her nose.

'My last name used to be Bunan,' Annanyn told Ka'harja as she peeled the banana off her face. 'But I liked the name Lyzik better, so I had to marry Sken to get it.'

'Right,' Ka'harja laughed as the girls shared a slimy, giggle-filled kiss that lasted just a second too long to be considered socially acceptable.

Annanyn's freckles lit up so brightly they blurred into large spots, and she pulled away from her wife with a giggle.

'*Bunananyn*,' she whispered.

Sken's gills let out another *scree* as she buried her face into Annanyn's neck.

Then there was a loud bang, and everyone turned to see Stars kick over her chair and shout.

'BROJA'KAR MIA!' she screeched at her mother, yanking her baby away and turning and running. 'MIA AND LEAVE ME ALONE!'

'NEG'AN!' Dena called after her daughter. 'NEG— STARS! COME BACK!'

Stars passed Ka'harja as she ran and he realised she was crying. Before he could do anything, though, Annanyn jumped up and followed her.

Sken put her hand on Ka'harja's shoulder to stop him following, and shook her head slowly. 'Give Annanyn a minute to calm her down.'

'But she's upset,' said Ka'harja.

'And I can tell you are too,' Sken sighed. 'You're not going to be any help if you're stressed out. She'll just feel it and it'll make her worse. What's wrong?'

'Nothing,' Ka'harja lied. 'I'm just homesick.'

With that, he downed the chunky soup he'd gotten from Coborn in a few gulps, and took the fruit platter Annanyn had abandoned.

'You want this?' he asked Sken. She shook her head and he ate the whole thing, fish and all.

'Ka'harja—'

'It's fine,' Ka'harja interrupted, jumping to his feet and returning to the abandoned cooking pot as Sken let out a defeated sigh. '*I'm fine.*'

Hands trembling, Ka'harja had another bowl of food. Then he scooped another serving into his bowl, which he basically inhaled. And another, which was gone in a few seconds.

He caught Coborn's eye as he finished his sixth bowl. She looked both honoured and horrified as he poured another, which he took to his mother instead of eating himself. He

wanted to eat it, but he was too embarrassed to admit he was still hungry.

At least Coborn hadn't seen him eat Annanyn's leftovers.

He made his way back to the healer's caravan and pushed open the door— And immediately wished he hadn't.

Stars and Annanyn were sitting with Distro, and Dena was on Coff's bed. Nobody looked happy. Especially not poor Coff, who was avoiding gazes like they were poisoned arrows— Though he met Ka'harja's for a brief moment as the alchemist came in and gave his mother the bowl.

'What's going on?' Ka'harja asked.

'Kekik won't leave me alone! I know what I'm doing!' Stars snapped. 'I don't need to be told what to do all the time! I'm not a berr anymore! I'm *not!* I'm tired of everyone treating me like a hakalika berr!'

'It's okay,' Annanyn put an arm around her and gave her a squeeze. 'Nobody thinks you're a child.'

'I just—' Dena put her head in her hands. 'I've raised berr before. I can help.'

'I can do it!' said Stars, tears welling up in her eyes. 'I can! I can! I can!'

'So... why are you all in here?' Ka'harja dared to ask it. 'Is Little Demon sick?'

'Na!' exclaimed Dena.

'Yi!' exclaimed Stars.

Ka'harja reeled back at the two as they began to bicker.

'He's just being fussy!' Dena growled. 'It happens!'

'He's not eating!' Stars retorted. She sounded close to tears as she continued, 'He was born so sick— What if he's sick again?! What if he *can't* eat?! What if it's something really bad and he zi'kaf?! I don't want to lose him!'

Ka'harja glanced at Coff, and the two shared a knowing look.

'You're not going to lose him,' Ka'harja promised. 'Coff'll figure out what's wrong. And if he's just being fussy than that's a good thing! I don't think it's too big a deal to make sure, though. But maybe... stop yelling at everyone? Listen to Demon, he's getting upset because of all the noise.'

Stars hesitated as Demon let out an unhappy blubber. Then she looked to the floor and pouted; not saying anything as Coff crept over and took the baby from her.

He looked terrified as he examined the child. He seemed to know that whatever the answer was he'd end up with one of the two nurlak unhappy with him.

'There's nothing wrong with him that I can see,' Coff said anxiously. 'But maybe... Stars, can I just... I, um... n-need a sample of your milk. Please, uh, don't be mad that I'm asking... i-it's for a good reason.'

Stars blinked at him. 'Why do you want it?'

'Th-There might be some— Something wrong with the taste or the, uh— The texture, that's making him fussy,' Coff picked up a squat cup. 'Um.... Th-This should work. Just... fill it? Or- Or half f-fill it. I-I don't need— T-Too much.'

'Fill it?' Stars' ears twitched curiously as she took the cup from the healer. 'With my milk? From me?'

'Yes,' Coff said gently.

No! Ka'harja almost gagged as Stars pulled up her shirt. *No, turn away. Look*

away— *By the Eight why aren't you turning away?*

'Is this enough?' Stars asked, holding the cup out to Coff. She flicked an ear when she saw Ka'harja. 'Are you okay, Ka'harja? You look lenta.'

'Yeah, no, I'm fine,' Ka'harja coughed. 'I didn't know it was... that easy to get the milk out.'

'Of course it's easy!' Stars giggled, covering her face with all four of her hands. 'Berr can't do things that aren't easy!'

Ka'harja flicked his tail, and then an ear, as his mother let out a loud bark of a laugh and fell out of bed.

'O-O-Oh Scara,' Coff gagged from Ka'harja's side. 'That's why he w-wouldn't feed — Oh, uh— Th-That's horrible.'

Everyone turned to Coff as he put the cup of milk on his desk and let out a half-wheeze to clear his nose.

'Does it smell bad?' Stars asked, taking the cup and giving it a sniff. 'Ew! That's mup gross! It didn't smell like that yesterday! Why does it smell like that now, Coff?'

'Y-You might be ge-getting s-sick,' Coff mumbled, motioning for Stars to put the cup back down. 'W-We need to ch-change your diet. Uh, at least for now. L-Let me l-look you over and make sure you don't have an inf— Infe— Infected c-cu—cut.'

'Can't be that bad,' Distro scoffed, leaping from her place on the floor and scooping up the cup.

'No Distro d-don—' Coff cut short as Ka'harja's mother took a sip of Stars' milk.

'Oh, that's nasty,' Distro grumbled, wrinkling her snout and pressing back her ears in disgust. 'Even Ka'harja wouldn't drink this, and he *likes* bitter shit!'

'No, Mum, I wouldn't drink it because it's disgusting!' Ka'harja exclaimed, horrified at the thought. 'That came out of Stars! I'm not— I'm not drinking something that came out of my friend!'

'What about Ganka?' Distro teased. 'If I recall—'

'He was my *boyfriend!*' Ka'harja snapped. 'And oh— Oh Great Star don't you even dare make that joke—'

'I don't see what the fuss is about,' Dena snorted. 'You drank an entire jug of goat's milk yesterday. Why is Stars' milk any different from a goat's? It's just food.'

'Oh, honey, no,' Distro held out the cup for Dena and mock-gagged. 'I wouldn't call this *food*. Taste it.'

Ka'harja felt faint as Dena reached out to take the sample. He didn't realise what he was doing until he'd slammed into the door in his rush to escape. When he did realise, he went faster; rushing out the door and sprinting across camp towards the river. He smacked into Sken, and immediately puked on her.

'Fuck that *burns!*' Sken exclaimed, yanking a flask off her belt and emptying its contents over her skin to wash away the sick. 'Oh Goddess. Ow. Ow. Oh. Oh Goddess, Ka'harja. What in the names of the moons is going on?'

'Ka'harja?' Stars' voice called curiously from camp. 'You didn't try the milk!'

'I WOULD RATHER *DIE!*'

'Milk?' Sken asked. 'What milk?'

'*Her* milk,' Ka'harja gagged.

Sken flicked back her fins, hissing in disgust. ‘Eyugh! Let’s get out of here before she sees me, too.’

Chapter End.

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