

Chapter 21:
Glif 29th, Minda
Year 10,053 AE
(Somewhere Unremarkable; Okatako)

Things had calmed down since that morning. Ka'harja had enjoyed hiding out by the river with Sken until Stars had finally found them. Luckily, though, she'd forgotten about the milk and had instead started asking questions about Tucker.

A therapy animal, Sken had said. To help her deal with post-traumatic stress disorder.

Ka'harja wasn't sure what that was, but by the name he could guess that it was something stressful and traumatic. He hadn't asked her to elaborate. And neither had Stars.... Sken hadn't given them the chance before she'd hurried off and started the caravan moving again.

As dumb as it seemed, Ka'harja hadn't been able to stop thinking about it all day. Something about seeing Sken anxiously rush off had unnerved him; he'd thought she was tough. Well— She still was tough. She commanded the entire caravan just by raising her voice a little. And she'd stood up against the Har'pies when they'd hunted down Stars and Dena. And she could beat Lif, Trat, Felelor *and* Baku in an arm wrestle— At the same time! She barely even broke a sweat with the four boys clinging to her!

That's why it was so odd to see her look so upset. So scared.

Ka'harja sighed and looked out of the caravan. They were moving at a walking pace. He could see that by how leisurely Felelor strolled into view.

'Lazy arse,' Felelor laughed, playfully giving Ka'harja the finger.

'I don't see why you all don't do it,' he retorted. 'It'd make travelling easier!'

'Walking's healthy,' said Felelor. 'Maybe if you did it some more, you'd find it easier to keep up!'

'Yeah!' Naranako chimed in. 'And— And if bandits see us all walking around they'll think: "oh no! Guards!" And won't attack us. So why not get up and give us a hand preventing an attack?'

'Nah, I'm good with this,' laughed Ka'harja. 'If they attack us then you guys can just pull out those nice chunky weapons of yours and fight them all sexy-like.'

'Blood and gore isn't sexy,' Naranako shivered.

'I beg to differ,' snickered Felelor. 'Remember when I almost got cut in half? Every foxen and their mum was lining up to have a go with me! Shame I couldn't actually do anything, though, on account of almost being cut in half.'

'You almost got cut in half?' Ka'harja asked.

'Yep,' Felelor nodded and pulled up his shirt to reveal a huge scar, running across his chest from his shoulder to his hip. 'Right before I met Sken! Actually, it was from jumping in front of Annanyn when our boat was attacked by valenor.'

Ka'harja flicked an ear. 'You knew Annanyn before Sken?'

'We used to work at the docks in Canis La'Can's royal city,' Naranako explained. 'Protecting boats and stuff. We got hired for a trip to Dr'oy and back. Annanyn was one

of the passengers on the return trip.'

'Annanyn's from Dr'oy?'

Felelor shook his head. 'Esle. She lived in Dr'oy for a few years, though!'

'What about the rest of you?' Ka'harja asked. 'You all know I'm from Heck'ne, but I don't know anything about you guys. Except that Coborn's from... I think it was Tyali?'

'Right on the gold,' said Felelor. 'But nah, most of us are from La'Can. Naranako and me come from the royal city. Same with Coff and Baku, though we didn't know each other. Lif and Trat come from some small town out near the Khya border, but moved to the city when they got out of the system.'

'The system?'

'Foster system,' Felelor clarified. 'They grew up in an orphanage. When Trat turned fifteen he took Lif and came to Ryala. They worked with us for a while before Sken and Koko showed up.'

'Sounds like they had it rough,' Ka'harja sighed.

'Yeah! I heard Trat's family died in a fire!' Naranako blurted. 'He was *freaking* out after your house burnt down. Would *never* admit it though. He's too much of a *big strong tough guy* for that. But he was really worried about you.'

Ka'harja gave an awkward smile as Felelor slapped Naranako around the head.

'What about Lif's family?'

'Single mother,' Felelor muttered. 'Overdose.'

'Ah,' Ka'harja looked away. 'That sucks.... Where's Koko from?'

'Oktoka,' said Felelor.

'And Krarf's from Bonark,' Naranako continued. 'Technically.'

'Technically?'

'His family owned a farm that was smack-bang in the middle of a three-way border,' Naranako grinned. 'So they owned land in three kingdoms. Apparently they kept their cattle in Konde, their crops in Canis, and their house was in Bonark! He's a citizen of all three kingdoms, but his birth certificate's officially registered by the Bonark government.'

'Fuck, that's complicated!' Ka'harja shook his head and laughed. 'I don't think I'm going to remember any of this by tonight!'

'It's fine,' Naranako laughed. 'You can ask again if you need! You're fun to chat with! Oh— And Sken! Almost forgot to say where she's from! Sapious. That human country past I'reka.'

Felelor's smile disappeared, and was replaced by a concerned frown. 'But she hates talking about it. So don't bring it up.'

'Yeah, she hates to cross the border!' Naranako exclaimed. 'We had to do a delivery there a few years ago and she stayed behind in Canis, that's how much it freaked her out!'

'Great Star, that sounds bad,' Ka'harja sucked in air through his teeth. *He'd finally been distracted from Sken, and now the conversation was coming full-circle again....* And he wasn't sure how to lead the topic away from it. Maybe he could just change it completely? 'Uh— So— Dumb question— But uh.... Why do we always follow rivers? Like, there's always water a short walk away from where we are! It's weird!'

‘Are you...’ Felelor sighed so heavily he stopped walking for a moment. ‘Are you— Seriously asking why a caravan owned by *seces* stays close to water?’

Oh?

Oh.

‘Right!’ Ka’harja felt his cheeks flush hot. ‘Seces. Fish ladies. River women. Lake... lesbians.’

‘*Lake lesbians?*’ Naranako bit his lip, trying to hide his grin. ‘Oh, man, Sken would love that one.’

‘Speaking of,’ Felelor gave a wave, and Ka’harja felt the caravan give a jolt as it slowed to a stop. ‘Sken! Break time already?’

‘Yeah, it’s a nice day and I thought everyone might enjoy the sun more if we weren’t on the move,’ Sken’s voice floated through the wall beside Ka’harja, so he climbed out of the caravan and peeked around the side to see Sken, with a shockingly calm and well-behaved Tucker at her side.

She gave him a smile, but Ka’harja’s stomach twisted when he saw the painful-looking welts that had appeared on her skin where he’d thrown up on her earlier.

‘Anyway, I was wondering if any of you knew where Mum was?’

The boys stared at her in silence.

Her... mum? Ka’harja blinked dumbly.

‘Um... say that again?’ Felelor closed his eyes and flicked up his ears. ‘I didn’t catch that.’

‘Koko?’ Sken twitched her fins and pushed Tucker away as he snuffled at her side. ‘Do any of you know where she’s ended up? I think she went to sleep in one of the caravans, but I can’t for the life of me remember which one!’

‘Koko,’ Naranako said slowly. ‘Uh, yeah. I think she’s in Coff’s bed. I can go get her if you like?’

‘No, no, it’s fine,’ Sken let out a relieved sigh and stroked Tucker. ‘I was just a little worried. I haven’t seen her all day and a part of me thought that we might have left her behind.’

Naranako let out a laugh. ‘Nah! Baku would never let that happen!’

‘And even if we did she knows where we’re heading,’ Felelor grinned. ‘But we’ll go let her know we’ve stopped; she’s been wanting to get some training in with Baku and this’ll be a good opportunity for that.’

‘Thanks,’ Sken nodded as the boys started towards the middle of the caravans. ‘Oh — Actually — I think we all need some proper time off. Let’s call it a day and set up camp!’

Ka’harja twitched an ear.

Wanting to stop early? That wasn’t like Sken at all...

‘You alright?’ Ka’harja asked.

‘Mm?’ Sken took in a too-short breath and didn’t turn to face Ka’harja. Instead she focused on patting her *incarah*. It was as if she was trying to distract herself. ‘I’m fine. Why do you ask?’

‘You called Koko “mum,”’ he blurted.

‘*What?*’ Sken exclaimed, her voice breaking as she turned to face Ka’harja. ‘I did

not— Did I? Seriously? N-No she's— She's not my damn mother! I wouldn't call her that!

'You did,' Ka'harja gave a grin. 'Felelor and Naranako heard you do it too. Ask them.'

'Shut up!' Sken ordered with a laugh. She cuffed Ka'harja around the ears and then wiped her brow. 'Scara, I must be more exhausted than I thought....'

'Want to sit by the river?' Ka'harja offered. He wasn't sure how good an idea it was, but Sken had offered to listen to *his* problems... he figured could give her that same respect in return. 'We can get drunk and cry about being gay.'

Sken's gills squeaked a laugh and she shook her head. 'Alright. Grab me the Saviour?'

Ka'harja turned to open the wooden box in the caravan, but Sken flicked him with the blunt side of her tail.

'No— The whole crate,' she muttered, leaning around Ka'harja and lifting it onto her shoulder. 'It takes a lot for me to get drunk.'

'Jeez, you sound like you might be part foxen!' Ka'harja joked. 'You *sure* Koko's not your mother?'

Sken let out one of her loud, screechy laughs, and flicked her tail a few times. 'Goddess you're hilarious! Come on. I've been around these parts before; there's a nice place to sit just up a ways by the river.'

Ka'harja stared at the sharp barb on Sken's tail for a moment before he realised she was beckoning Tucker with it. He grabbed his own drinks from the back of the caravan and quickly hurried after the secas and her pet.

They made their way down to the river, where Sken dumped the heavy box on the ground and (after pulling out a couple of bottles) sat on top of it. Tucker rested his head in her lap and she gave him a gentle tap on the nose.

'Cheers,' Sken held out her drink as Ka'harja flopped on the ground beside her.

They clinked their bottles together and then in one big, long scull, they both emptied their bottles.

'Great star!' Ka'harja coughed his way through the last mouthful of his drink. 'I didn't think you'd beat me in that!'

Sken laughed and dropped her bottle in exchange for another. 'I refuse to be second best at *anything!*'

It was obviously supposed to be a joke... but Ka'harja couldn't help but feel there was just a *little bit* of truth to it.

'So, what do you want to talk about?' Sken asked, finishing her second bottle the same way she'd drunk the first.

Ka'harja shrugged. He wasn't sure. There was a *lot* he was curious about right now. But nothing he was prepared to hear the answers for.... Maybe now was the time to ask.... 'What's Coff like?'

'Coff?' Sken's gills twitched curiously. 'He's alright. Koko reckons he works too hard. Which is saying something, considering she pushes people more than *I* do! But I think....'

'You think?'

'It's to distract him from something,' she finished. Then she cracked open another bottle of drink. She drank this one slowly. 'He's always looking for something to do; when he runs out of work he'll tear down his shelves and rearrange them just to keep himself busy.... I keep telling him it's fine. But he doesn't know how to stop. Complete opposite of you. You don't seem to start anything.'

Complete opposites, Ka'harja sighed. Maybe his anxieties were right. He shouldn't try with Coff.

'You know he has twelve younger brothers?' Sken muttered. '*Twelve!* I can't even imagine what kind of pressure that puts on him.'

'Pressure?' Ka'harja's tail twitched. 'How could he feel pressured? He's not living with them.'

'He gets me to send almost all his pay to them,' Sken took another long drink. 'So does Coborn, actually. Sends all her pay to Coff's mum.... I think she likes her more than her own mother. And Baku. He sends his money home, too.'

There was a moment of quiet, only broken by Tucker snuffling at Sken's leg. Neither Ka'harja or Sken seemed to want to say anything, though. So they sat in silence and kept drinking.

As they did, Koko and Baku raced across the field on the other side of the river. They both had swords, and swung them vigorously at each other as if putting on a show — And Ka'harja realised they were; Stars danced around them, clapping her hands and cheering as the two showed off their fighting skills with an exaggerated flourish.

A laugh came from beside Ka'harja, and he glanced at Sken. She gave a wave to Stars before leaning back and downing the rest of her new bottle.

'So... why'd you hire Coff?' Ka'harja asked. 'Why not someone else?'

'Coff's mentor,' Sken sighed, and looked at her scarred arm. 'He trained the healer who saved my life. I wanted someone with similar practices. His mentor didn't want the job, but Coff was interested. I was offering double what he was getting in his traineeship. And he was almost done with his studies so it's not like he was a complete novice.'

'I'm sorry,' muttered Ka'harja.

'For what?'

'I... I'm not sure,' Ka'harja took a swig from his drink so he didn't have to look Sken in the eye. 'That you've been through so much, I guess. It's hard.'

'It was a long time ago,' Sken replied with a sigh.

'I can't wait for *this* to be a long time ago,' Ka'harja admitted. 'It's weird. I was... finally starting to forget about Kay'oten and everything that happened in Heck'ne. And then it just... comes back to bite me. And burn down my house.'

'You'll be alright,' she said. 'Trust me, no matter how bad things get there's always a way out again.'

'So far, my ways "out" have been a broken leg and murder,' Ka'harja stared out across the river. He wasn't really interested in watching Baku and Koko spar, but it was distracting enough. 'What... was your way out?'

Sken sucked down her gills with a loud popping noise and took a drink. She looked away from Ka'harja and after a few moments let out a long sigh. 'Dragged along a gravel road and left to bleed to death,' she said bitterly. Then she let out a hiss. 'I should have

gone with my gut and kept my mouth shut.'

Ka'harja glanced at Sken from the corner of his eye, too nervous to turn his head to face her, and saw her staring viciously at the shredded webbing between her scarred fingers.

'Um, Raoul, I think I like girls,' her voice rose, as if she was mimicking her younger self. 'I know you said that I was supposed to like you, but I don't think I do.'

'Sken—'

'Bastard!' Sken hissed and threw her half-empty bottle into the river. It collided with a loud splash and sunk under the surface immediately, a stream of brown bubbles appearing as it disappeared. 'I'll kill him if I ever see him again!'

As harsh as her words were, her voice broke, and Ka'harja could see the hurt on her face before she buried her head against Tucker's back.

'My best friends tried to kill me,' her voice came out as a sob. 'But I guess that's just what humans are like.'

Her gills let out a mournful squeal, and Ka'harja felt his own chest tighten. He wasn't sure what to say or do to make her feel better.... He shouldn't have asked— Or even offered to drink with her. He should have just left it.

Gods, he was an idiot!

Why did he always have to make things worse?

Even after all these years away from Heck'ne, everything was *still* going wrong!

Nothing ever was the way it was supposed to be! And it would never be the same again!

He'd been threatened and hurt and humiliated. He'd lost his home and nearly lost his mother— And he still might if her cough came back!

He couldn't bear that thought.

'Ka'harja?' suddenly Stars' voice was in his ear. 'What's wrong? Why are you crying?'

'Everything's wrong,' he sobbed, not looking up at his friend. 'Nothing's right. I want to go home! I ju— I ju— I want to go home! Plea-th— Say that I'm going home again!'

'You *are* going home,' Stars said softly. She pulled his hands away from his face and held them gently against her chest as she wiped his tears away with her free hand.

'Please don't cry.'

Ka'harja heard a squeak and turned to see Sken sobbing into Koko's chest— But only for a moment before Stars gently turned him back to look at her.

She blinked, her beautiful blue eyes sparkling with tears, and Ka'harja felt himself calming down.

He felt... strange, looking at her like this. It was familiar. Like it had happened before.

Slowly, not completely sure what he was doing, he reached up and put his hand on her forehead to feel along the bumps where her second set of eyes should have been.

A shiver ran up his spine. 'Ith it th-tarting to rain?'

Baku glanced up and shook his head. 'Nothing.'

'I remember, too,' Stars leant forward and kissed Ka'harja's cheek. 'And I promise

it will be mip. At least for the next nine years.... Because that's how long my last promise lasted.'

Ka'harja stared at her.

Her last....

A sad chuckle rose in his throat. 'You were right. It wa-th okay, wasn't it?'

'And it will be this time, too,' Stars told him. 'And this time we're both going to be mip, so it's even better. Not just you this time.'

Ka'harja sniffed. 'Yeah. Yeah. That's right. Thanks....'

'Hm. So. Anyone else need to cry?' Koko asked, dropping between Ka'harja and Sken's crate of Seaweed Saviour. She picked up one of Ka'harja's drinks and took a sip. 'Or is it just you two?'

Baku nudged her with his foot. 'Be nice.'

'I am,' Koko rolled her eyes. 'Stars? What about you?'

Stars sighed and flopped onto her back; rolling over and disappearing into the long grass with a sniff.

'Guess that answers that,' Koko muttered. 'She's so sensitive.... Remember when I was like that, Sken?'

'No?' Sken blinked, and gave her gills a rub.

'Oh, right,' Koko grinned. 'That was you!'

Sken let out a snort through her gills. 'Ah! Those were the days!'

'Remember how you used to make bracelets out of seaweed?' Koko teased.

'Don't remind me,' Sken wiped her nose and rolled her eyes, then turned to Ka'harja. 'I didn't know you had a lisp.'

'Please don't tell anyone,' he swallowed. 'I don't want them making fun of me.'

'Why would they do that?' she asked. 'It's a lisp! Do people really make fun of you for it?'

Stars rolled into view, flattening the grass as she flopped towards the trio. 'His yalfit used to beat him up and say his voice was tarnart.'

'Stars!' Ka'harja exclaimed. 'Don't— Don't talk about him! Please. *I don't want to talk about it....*'

'Sorry,' Stars said quietly. 'Do you want to go to sleep? That always helps me feel better after I've been sad.'

Ka'harja wasn't sure what he wanted.

'I think you should,' said Koko. 'You too, Sken. Go find Annany and take a nap with her. You need a break.'

Sken looked at the ground. 'I'm fine.'

'You're going to go give your wife a hug,' Koko grunted. 'Or I'm going to kick your shins in. Pick one.'

Grunting, Sken pushed herself to her feet. '*Fine.*'

'Ka'harja, go see your mother,' Koko demanded. 'No more drink. Just you, your mother, and a hairbrush. Go. Or you'll have to face Basher and Bruiser.'

Ka'harja gave a laugh as Koko kissed her fists.

'Bruiser's the more forgiving one,' Baku commented playfully. 'But Basher knows

how to party!

Koko scoffed and lowered her hands. 'Go on, Ka. Sleep it off.'

Ka'harja nodded. 'That sounds like a good idea.'

Chapter End.

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