

**Chapter 22:**  
**Glif 29<sup>th</sup>, Minda**  
**Year 10,053 AE**  
**(Somewhere Unremarkable; Okatako)**

‘Tell him!’

Ka’harja didn’t want to open his eyes. He barely had the energy to twitch his ear as his mother cackled loudly.

He wished she wouldn’t. Not now. He wanted to go back to sleep.

‘Great Sca-Sca— *Scara!* I-I’m not telling him!’ Coff’s voice squeaked. ‘Do you know how em-emba-emba-emba—’

‘Breath in,’ Distro chuckled. ‘I know it’s embarrassing. That’s *why* you should tell him!’

Ka’harja wasn’t sure he wanted to interrupt whatever this conversation was about. He’d already had so many awkward moments with Coff... interrupting a private moment wasn’t about to help.

‘I— I c-couldn’t,’ Coff managed. ‘It— It was— So much—’

‘It was just a dream,’ Distro laughed. ‘Besides, he dreamt about you last night, too.’

Ka’harja’s hazy brain tried to put the information together.

Great Star were they... talking about *him*?

Maybe. He was too tired to tell.

‘W-We were get-et-et— Getting m-ma-married,’ Coff’s voice came out as a wheeze. ‘I s-sunk into the ca-cake and drow-drowned. He d-doesn’t n— Need to know about it!’

*Sunk into the cake?* Ka’harja turned the thought over. It sounded familiar. *Coff had the same dream he had? But... how? How had Coff had the same dream? Was Coff a dream master?*

‘Suit yourself,’ Distro’s humoured snort was followed by crunching as she ate something that sounded vaguely like— SHE WAS EATING AN APPLE!

He didn’t mean to sit up. But suddenly Ka’harja was upright and staring at his mother.

She’d stopped mid-chew and was staring back with a huge grin on her face.

‘Eighth child of the Ninth, Sweetheart,’ Distro laughed. ‘Did you have a good sleep?’

‘Apple,’ was all he managed.

‘D-Did you ju-just wake up?’ Coff asked.

Ka’harja turned, and saw crimson blush spreading over the man, from his cheeks all the way down to his shoulders.

*No, I heard everything.*

Was that a good idea to say, though? Should he tell Coff he’d walked in his dream? It was already so embarrassing that Coff had seen the dream.... At least Coff didn’t realise what had happened! If Coff knew he was a dream master he’d know that the dream had been Ka’harja’s and not his own.

‘K-Ka’harja?’ Coff asked.

Okay. No.

He'd say something.

He'd tell Coff that he liked him and maybe he would understand. Even if he wasn't interested, he'd understand why Ka'harja had been so awkward and would be nice about it.

How to start, though? What should he say?

*Crunch.*

'Apple?' Ka'harja instinctively turned back to his mother, who stared at him with a smug grin as she chewed.

'I think this is what woke him up,' she laughed through her mouthful. 'You want the apple, Sweetheart?'

'Yes!'

What kind of stupid question was that? *Of course he wanted the apple!*

'Too bad!' she replied, taking another bite. 'This one's mine. Coborn's making soup, though, so you might be able to grab one if she's got any left over— Calm down, you don't need to stand up so fast!'

Ka'harja hadn't realised he'd gotten up. He stared at his legs for a minute before taking a deep breath. He needed to relax and wake himself properly before he thought about doing *anything* else.

'Nap really took it out of you, didn't it?' Distro laughed. 'You feeling any better than before?'

Ka'harja nodded. He felt a *lot* better. It was a good idea to sleep it off. Stars had been pretty smart suggesting it.

'Catch!' Distro gave a laugh and —before Ka'harja had time to think— threw her apple to her son.

It was lucky he was able to catch it before it hit him in the face. But he was grateful to have it and devoured what was left faster than he meant to.

'C-Core and uh— All?' Coff managed. Then shook his head. 'Not sur-surprised. It's y-you.'

'Should I be offended?' asked Ka'harja. 'Because it sounds like I should be offended.'

Coff blushed even darker and looked away. 'N-No. I— Uh.... N-Need to— T—Talk to y-you ou-outside. P-Please.'

'Oh, uh, okay,' Ka'harja felt his cheeks grow hot as he followed the healer out of the caravan. What did Coff want to say? Was Coff going to bring up the dream? Was he going to say he liked Ka'harja back? No. He wouldn't.... Would he? What if he did? What if—

'I th-think Distro's depressed,' Coff blurted as soon as the door clicked shut. 'I'm— W-Worried she might need medi-medication that I d-don't have.'

'Depressed?' Ka'harja was taken aback. He hadn't expected.... It took him a moment to take in what Coff had said. 'You think my mum's depressed?'

'Yes,' Coff replied gently. 'I-I'm worried about her. I... tr-tried to-to— To— Talk to her a-a-about it b-but....'

'But what?'

'Sh-She diagn-nosed me with "stupid" and th-threw a— Threw a book at me,' Coff

muttered. 'I-I'm sc-scared to br-bring it up again. I was th-thinking m-maybe you could?'

Ka'harja shrugged. 'Maybe. I'm not surprised she's depressed. She's been through a lot.'

'You— You b-both have,' Coff told him, and Ka'harja felt the healer's tail brush against his leg in a show of sympathy. 'I think you sh-should b-both l-look into getting thera-therapy when we get to K-Ko-Ko-ka-k—'

'Kokako?' Ka'harja offered, though he didn't meet Coff's eye. 'Yeah. That sounds like an idea.'

Coff nodded.

Then they both went quiet.

Ka'harja felt awkward. Should he say something? It seemed like there was more to say. But what? What could he say? Maybe something about potions? Maybe he could bring up how nice he thought Coff's shelving methods were? They were good. Really good. He might even have to steal some of his sorting methods for himself.

'D-D-Do y-you wan-want to-to-to-to-to—' for a moment Coff got stuck on the word. Then he stopped talking and took a deep, slow breath. 'Ball with Baku?'

'What?' Ka'harja blinked. 'Do I want to ball with Baku— Oh, *play* ball with Baku?'

Coff nodded. And swallowed. And blushed. He looked as awkward as Ka'harja felt.

'Yeah— Sure. If you want to, I don't see why not,' Ka'harja gave a shrug. 'What sort of ball?'

'Jus-Just... *ball*,' Coff managed. 'Catch? A-As l-long as— As it's not k-keep away.'

'Aw, no keep away? But I'm *great* at that game!' Ka'harja joked. 'Mum and I used to play it all the time. Then I got too tall.'

'H— With two people?' Coff's voice rose in confusion.

'It's not too hard. The rule is you can't hold the ball for more than five seconds at a time. Lot's of throwing it up in the air. And also lots of elbows.'

Coff gave a weak laugh.

'Hey, so...' Ka'harja hesitated for a moment. Then he took a deep breath. 'Do you think *I'm* depressed?'

Coff took a sharp breath in through his teeth. A sharp, very telling breath. 'You.... You're a l-lot of th-things.'

'So yes?'

'Y-Yes,' he admitted. 'I think you're de-depressed. An-And you have an-anxiety. And— I think— You m-may have... AD— AD— Uh, ADHD.'

'So I'm just a grab-bag of symptoms, huh?' Ka'harja sighed. 'What's ADHD?'

'You— Don't know?' Coff shrugged when Ka'harja shook his head. 'A-Attention defi-deficit h-h-hy-hyperactive d-disorder. It's— A learning disability. Do you e-ever have t-trouble paying attention to things? Or— Or find y-yourself drawn t-to sounds or m-movements? Eas-Easily distracted?'

'Shit, that's my life,' letting out a laugh Ka'harja shrugged. 'The only thing I've ever been able to focus on was alchemy. And then it's sort of like... I focus too much and lose track of time?'

'Hyperfocus,' Coff muttered. 'It-It's a symptom.'

‘Ah, cool,’ Ka’harja gave a nod. Then he spotted Baku by the river and gave a wave. ‘HEY! BAKU! WANT TO HANG OUT?’

Baku lifted a hand back. ‘Sure! Can Stars come? We’re in the middle of hide-and-seek! Help me find her?’

‘Sure,’ Ka’harja replied. ‘Where do we start?’

‘Anywhere,’ Baku shrugged. ‘I’ve been looking for her for at least half an hour now and I have *no* idea where she could have gone.’

‘Hmm,’ Ka’harja took a deep breath and scanned the field. Where could she— ‘She’s in that bush.’

‘What— How!’ Baku exclaimed, following Ka’harja’s finger to the river and poking at the bushes.

Stars sprung out of it with a laugh and grabbed Baku in a tight hug— She spun him around for a moment before stumbling, and the two of them ended up on the ground.

‘You got me!’ Stars giggled. ‘I was mip mip at it though! It took you *forever* to find me!’

‘And it wasn’t even me!’ Baku replied playfully. ‘Ka’harja’s the one who saw you!’

‘Was he?’ Stars beamed. ‘That means he gets to pick the next game!’

‘Ah, perfect!’ Ka’harja laughed. ‘Coff and I wanted to play catch.’

‘Oh! Oh!’ Stars clapped her hands together happily. ‘I’ll be *so* good at that game! I have four hands so I can catch things *really* well! What are we catching? Birds? Lizards?’

‘A ball, if we can find one,’ replied Ka’harja.

‘I have one with my stuff,’ Baku leapt off the ground and headed back towards the caravans. ‘Come on, we can see if Koko wants to play too!’

‘Wh-What about C-Coborn?’ Coff asked.

‘Oh, yeah! It’ll be just like old times!’ Baku laughed, shouldering Coff as they fell into place beside each other. ‘We’ll put you in the middle and play keep away!’

‘Pl— Please no,’ Coff sighed, though the corners of his mouth turned into a smile. ‘Anything b-but that.’

‘What’s keep away?’ Stars asked curiously, her ears twitching.

‘You pick someone to make fun of, and keep the ball away from them,’ Baku explained. ‘It’s fun to put Coff in the middle. He can’t jump very high and is *terrible* at catching things. So it’s pretty easy to win against him.’

‘That sounds mean,’ Stars’ ears flicked back and her eyes widened. ‘Can we *not* play keep away? I don’t want to be mean to Coff.’

‘Aw, but he *loves* it!’ Baku teased, grabbing Coff and ruffling his hair. They both stumbled a few steps before Coff managed to shake Baku off. Baku let out a loud laugh and wagged his tail with joy. ‘He knows I’m just teasing, don’t you Coff?’

‘Y-Yeah,’ Coff sighed.

For a moment Baku faltered. His smile froze on his face— Or did it shrink just the smallest bit? Ka’harja couldn’t tell which it was. But something changed. His tail dropped and his ears twitched and something in his eyes looked different.... Then he slapped Coff on the back and let out a laugh that didn’t sound quite natural. ‘You okay?’

‘Y-Yeah,’ Coff shifted awkwardly. ‘I-I’m fine.’

Baku didn’t look like he believed him.... And Ka’harja hardly believed him, either.

'Are you lying?' Stars asked. 'You don't sound like you're mup. You sound really mup. Like you're very sad and not okay at all!'

'I think he's just stressed,' Baku answered, cutting off Coff's own reply. 'He's alright. And if he's not, then me and him will talk later in private and figure it out.'

'Thanks, Baku,' Coff replied, his shoulders relaxing. 'I see Coborn. Sh-Should we go get her?'

'I'll go grab her and the ball and see if I can find Koko,' said Baku. 'You guys get ready to play. I think we should set up some goals and play boys against girls, but I'll see what the others think first.'

'Okay!' Stars exclaimed, waving happily as Baku hurried into camp. 'This sounds like it's going to be a lot of fun! What are goals?'

'Goals are... *things*, like a basket or a net, that you try and get the ball into,' Ka'harja explained. 'Every time you get the ball into one you get a point, and at the end of the game the team with the most points wins.'

'Oh, that sounds like flakha fun!' Stars clapped her hands and jumped in place. 'Do we kick the ball or do we throw it?'

'D—Depends on the game,' said Coff. 'I—I l-like throwing b-better. I— Find it har-hard to— To kick with my l-leg.'

Ka'harja frowned.

His leg?

Ka'harja *had* noticed something weird about it before. But was it really a problem? Coff's limp didn't seem half as bad as his own.

'Oh, right,' Stars nodded. 'That *would* make it bakti. You'd just stumble and fall over!'

For a moment, Stars lifted up a leg and teetered in an exaggerated way— As if she was showing Coff what would happen. Then she actually slipped and fell, and landed in the grass with a heavy grunt.

'Like that!' she exclaimed, throwing all four of her arms up but making no attempt to stand. 'You'd fall over just like that!'

'You okay?' Ka'harja chuckled and offered her his hand. 'Need help?'

'Yes, please. I hurt my butt,' replied Stars. She let Ka'harja pull her up and then turned to Coff. 'Coff, I have a question. I keep forgetting to ask it when we're alone. And I have to ask when we're alone because my kekik said it's very dreankot to ask. But I want to know. Can I ask you a dreankot question? Uh, I mean.... Dreankot means *rude*, and I want to ask a *rude* question. I don't think Ka'harja will mind if I'm rude in front of him because Kekik says he's really rude himself. And if I'm being rude and he's *always* rude I think it's okay to be rude in front of him.'

'I— Uh—' Coff fumbled with his hands for a moment before giving a weak shrug. 'I s-suppose it's o-okay....'

'What's wrong with Annanyn?' Stars blurted. She waited a moment, continuing when she didn't get a response. 'The dots on her skin. Like what Distro used to have before she turned into a dragon. I think Ka'harja called them freckles? What's wrong with her freckles? Sken's ones are all bright and glowy but Annanyn's freckles are always really dull unless she's happy. Why are they like that? Are they broken? Is

Annanyn broken?’

‘Uh— I— Uh—’ an awkward blush found its way across Coff’s face, and he shook his head. ‘Anna— Annanyn isn’t— Sh-She’s not broken! Sh-She’s a— A no-glow.’

‘A no-glow?’

‘Her freckles d-don’t wo-work properly.’

‘So she is broken?’

‘N-No,’ Coff sighed. ‘It’s— Like your e-eyes. Y-You only ha-have one s-set. That d-doesn’t mean you’re br-broken.’

‘Really?’ Stars twitched her ears curiously. Then her face lit up. ‘Ka’harja! Did you hear that? I’m like Annanyn! Isn’t that mip? Annanyn is mip! So being like her must be mip too! Does that make me mip?’

‘You’ve always been mip,’ Ka’harja laughed. ‘In your own way.’

‘You mean it?!’

Ka’harja nodded.

‘BAKU! BAKU!’ Stars exclaimed, leaping into the air with excitement and waving as Baku came into view. ‘KA’HARJA SAYS I’M MIP! I’M MIP, BAKU! BAKU! I’M MIP!’

‘Oh, we’ll see about that!’ he replied playfully. ‘I might believe it if you can get past my goal-keeping!’

## **Chapter End.**

If you enjoyed reading, you can find more of this world on ***demrefor.com***

You can also donate and help me pay the bills at ***ko-fi.com/jadewyton***

And, if you're interested in my non-Demrefor related work, head over to  
***cjadewyton.com***