

**Chapter 23:**  
**Mrerf 6<sup>th</sup>, Grada**  
**Year 10,053 AE**  
**(The Floor; Coff's Caravan)**

Ka'harja couldn't believe it had been an entire month since he lost his home.

A whole nine weeks.

Thirty-six days.

It felt like yesterday.

But it wasn't. It was a whole month ago.

It hurt his heart to think about.

Sure, lots of great things had happened in those thirty-six days.... He'd met Stars, for one. And Little Demon had been born for another. And he got to know Baku. And Coff. And Naranako and Felelor.... And Lif wasn't too bad.

Trat was a bit of an arsehole sometimes. But just sometimes. Other times he was fun.

Ka'harja sighed as the foxen's voice shouted something outside, and rolled over to stare at the roof again.

He didn't want to travel anymore. He was sick of it. Sick of having to walk around and talk to people and do things he never had to do at home with his mother. He just wanted to lie on the floor and count the water stains in the roof and pretend he had no responsibilities. But he couldn't even do that without getting motion sick. Not here in the caravans.

'Depression,' Ka'harja muttered. The word still felt foreign on his tongue. 'I have depression.'

It was weird to think he was sick. He'd never even considered the possibility until he'd talked with Coff about it. He'd figured that was just how he was. That was just how life was. He always thought that could feel happy, so how could he have had depression? But it made a lot of sense once Coff explained it to him.

'Depression.'

It was nice to know that what he was feeling was real.

And weird to think they were halfway to town now, according to Sken. One more month and he and his mum could settle down in Kokako Boaka and... he wasn't sure what they'd do there. Probably spend days at a time in the taverns.

Though after what Coff said, he wasn't sure he should be drinking anymore.

He'd always thought his mother drank too much. He'd never thought that *he* might drink too much, too. Not when he was comparing himself to Distro.... But now, after learning a little more... he needed to watch himself. He loved his mother, but he didn't want to turn into her. At least not that part of her.

He glanced up at her, snoring loudly in her bed, and sighed.

He loved her so much it hurt sometimes. He wasn't sure he could ever tell her just how grateful he was she'd taken him in. He could say it with words—and he had before a hundred times—but it would never feel like enough. She'd never know just *how much*

he loved her.

The caravan began to slow, though Ka'harja's gut took a second to realise when they'd stopped.

A hard knock sounded on the caravan door and Baku yelled something about starting dinner and needing extra hands for setting up camp.

Ka'harja almost cursed at him. He didn't want to get up. He wanted to wallow in his misery in peace. But the camp needed help. And he was able-bodied. Somewhat. Mostly.

He could do the work they needed him to, at least.

He supposed he'd have to wake his mother, too. She'd been asleep all day and needed to get up. He didn't want to wake her. She was getting better and sleep had been helping. Even Coff had said it was best to let her rest as much as she could right now so she could sleep off her sickness.

Ka'harja shook his head and forced himself up. He had to wake her. No matter how much she slept, she wouldn't get better if she didn't eat.

'Mum?' he said gingerly. When she didn't respond he raised his voice a little. 'Mum? It's time to get up.'

No response.

With a sigh, Ka'harja leapt onto the bed and squeezed himself between his mother and the wall. He braced his legs against her and then—

Nothing.

He couldn't bring himself to push her out of bed today.

Instead he shifted until he was sitting beside her and let out a heavy sigh and wiped his eyes and held his breath— He didn't want to cry, but he just wasn't sure what to do anymore.

The moment he let out his sob his mother shot upright and turned to him.

'Ka? Sweetheart? What's wrong?!' she exclaimed, though her eyes were still mostly closed.

He almost laughed. 'If I knew it was this easy to wake you I'd have burst into tears every morning.'

'What's wrong?' Distro repeated.

'I'm not sure,' Ka'harja answered, wiping his eyes again. 'Everything? But also nothing. I just feel really shitty, I guess.'

'It's been a hard time,' said Distro before opening her mouth wide in a very sudden, very loud yawn. It reminded Ka'harja of a snake for a moment, but then it ended and her mouth slammed shut, her teeth *clack*-ing together as she licked her lips and snorted. 'Eighth child of the Ninth, it's a bright morning.'

'It's almost dinnertime,' Ka'harja corrected. 'Baku wanted help setting up camp but... I don't know. I just don't feel up to it—'

'NEVER MIND ABOUT SETTING UP CAMP!' Baku's voice shouted and he slammed a hand on the caravan door. 'THERE'S A DRAGON NEARBY. WE'RE MOVING ON.'

Before Ka'harja could let out his sigh of relief, Distro leapt out of bed and yanked the door open.

'Baku! I'm offended!' she cried out in a mocking tone. 'How could you! That very

well might be one of my *cousins!*'

Baku let out a bark of a laugh, 'Well your cousin's a *dick* who's roasted an entire flock of wild sheep!'

'He prepared dinner for us!' Distro called back. 'You should be grateful!'

Ka'harja snorted his own laugh and wiped the last of the tears from his eyes. 'Great Star, Mum! Great Star.'

Distro turned back to her son with a wide grin across her face. 'At least you don't have to help with camp anymore.'

He nodded. 'Maybe I can nap until we find a new campground or something.'

'Or we could talk?' Distro suggested, plopping down on the bed. 'I've been asleep so much lately we've barely talked. I miss you. I wish I didn't have to stay in here all the time. It'd be nice to sleep by you again.... I still don't see why you've suddenly taken to sleep outside with the others, when I'm right here!'

'You're sick,' Ka'harja lied. *Well...* he half-lied. It wasn't the *only* reason he'd joined the boys outside, though it *did* contribute to his decision... but it was mostly his embarrassment with how he felt about Coff that had driven him out.

That, and the teasing he'd received from Trat for sharing his mother's bed like he was still a kid. Felelor had immediately shut the man up, of course, but it still made Ka'harja blush to think about.

'What, you're scared I'm contagious or something?' Distro scoffed.

'Mum, you know have to rest *properly*,' Ka'harja pushed. 'And it's hard to do that when we're so cramped up. I keep stealing the blanket while we sleep— And you *need* to stay warm!'

'Warm, shmorm,' Distro snorted, flaring her nostrils and rolling her eyes. 'You're warmer than a stupid blanket! If you want to sleep outside so badly, I could always join you—'

'Not until Coff says it's okay,' Ka'harja said, firmly.

'You're only taking his side because you want to *bone* him,' Distro responded, her grin reappearing. 'Don't think I don't see how it is! You'd rather have *him* sleeping next to you than *me!* I'm being *replaced* by a *nerd!*'

'He's not a nerd!' Ka'harja retorted.

'He enjoys *math*,' scrunching up her snout, Distro made a deep, chesty gag of a noise. 'Math, Ka'harja.'

'Okay, he's a bit of a nerd.'

'He's a full-blown nerd,' Distro pushed. 'He likes math, hates sport, and he's *obsessed* with doing things by the book! Like, if a recipe mentions to not inhale the powder? He'll use a medical-grade face mask—'

'To be fair he's a doctor so "medical grade" is—'

'AND! AND!' Distro raised her voice over her son's. 'He tried to get me to meditate with him! *Meditate*, Ka'harja! He claims its "therapeutic" or some shit.'

'Meditation *is* therapeutic!' Ka'harja rolled his eyes.

'So's getting drunk and banging six girls at once!' retorted Distro. 'But there's such a thing as *self-respect*—'

'Of which you have none—'

‘Which I exercise *every day* of my life!’ Distro grunted. ‘So you’d never catch me *meditating*, thank you!’

‘But banging six girls at once is fine?’

‘Banging six girls at once is *great*,’ Distro retorted. She slammed a hand on her knee and then paused, as if something had suddenly clicked. ‘Oh Great Star. I just realised who stole my emerald bracelet. It was that *bitch* Tarina!’

Ka’harja let out a loud laugh which he made no effort to smother as his mother’s mouth hung open and her nose turned to a sneer.

‘Fucking *Tarina*— No— No distractions, this is about Coff,’ Distro shook her head. ‘You know he writes books in his spare time?’

‘I thought it was just the one?’

‘Nope! Seven finished, three half-done,’ Distro grinned, her teeth clanking together. ‘He let me read some of his stuff. It’s rough writing but the plot’s pretty solid. I mean, rough writing’s probably best considering it was also the outline for a game of Caves and Creatures he hosted for Baku and Coborn. Those games can get pretty out of hand.’

Ka’harja shrugged. He wouldn’t really know. He’d never joined his mother when her friends passed through. He thought they were great—they were like family and he loved them dearly—but he wasn’t a fan of their weird games.

*Ah, piss!*

They were going to be surprised when they showed up expecting their usual order of potions to deliver. He wondered how much of the wreckage would be washed away by rain and weather before they got there. Would they think the pair of alchemists were dead? Or would they assume they’d gotten out safely?

And their alchemy clients.... It would be weird that they went silent so suddenly. What would they think?

‘What are you thinking about?’ Distro asked, waving a hand in front of her son’s face.

‘Just— Aunt Denni. And our alchemy clients? What’s going to happen to all of that?’

‘Shit. I’ll have to send everyone an update on our situation once we get to Kokako,’ said Distro. ‘Our clients can either keep with us or replace us. Up to them. Denni and the boys... they’ll be fine for now. Probably. If I tell my father what’s happened he’ll make sure they know we’re fine.’

Ka’harja nodded, and let out a deep breath. There were still so many loose ends to tie up from the fire. He couldn’t believe how overwhelming it all was. He wished it was all over already. That he didn’t have to follow anything up and constantly remind himself of what happened. He just wanted to move on and forget it....

‘Come on, Sweetheart,’ Distro shouldered Ka’harja and grinned. ‘It’s going to be fine. Look at the bright side: I haven’t coughed in ages!’

‘Three days isn’t that impressive,’ Ka’harja said tentatively. He didn’t mean to be so weary, but he was scared to be optimistic.

‘And tomorrow it’ll be a full week,’ Distro snorted. ‘So it’ll *become* impressive— Ah, fuck hold on.’

For a second Ka’harja wondered what his mother was doing as she leapt off the bed and headed for the caravan door. She yanked it open and made a guttural snort like she

was sucking something out of her throat— Then she spat.

‘AH, DISTRO! That’s *foul!*’ cried Lif.

‘It didn’t hit ya!’ Distro called back. ‘Get over it!’

Ka’harja laughed as his mother closed the door and Lif’s cries of protest went quiet.

‘Sorry,’ Distro sniffed and wiped her nose on her sleeve. ‘What were we talking about?’

Ka’harja shrugged. He didn’t remember. Something about Caves and Creatures?

No. That was before....

‘Want to break into Coff’s drawers?’ Distro asked. ‘We can find his private stuff and mess with it!’

‘No!’ Ka’harja cried. ‘I’m *not* breaking into Coff’s drawers!’

‘Aw, love’s turned you soft,’ winking, Distro sat next to her son again and snorted to clear her throat. ‘You wouldn’t hesitate if he were anyone else!’

‘I wouldn’t break into Sken’s drawers,’ Ka’harja defended.

His mother rolled her eyes dramatically and shook her head. ‘Because you’re scared of her. You’re not scared of Coff, are you?’

‘It’s just that I don’t want him to get upset—’

‘Because you want to bone him!’

*‘Because he saved your life!’*

Distro just shrugged.

‘He’s a nice guy!’

‘Alright,’ Distro raised a submissive hand. ‘I get it. I’ll stop teasing. You know I’m right, though. And I still think you should ask him out.’

Ka’harja sighed and looked away. ‘You think?’

‘I do think,’ she replied. ‘You two are perfect for each other.’

This time it was Ka’harja who shrugged. ‘Has he told you about his ex?’

‘He didn’t *tell* me. But I know about her,’ said Distro. ‘He talks in his sleep sometimes.... But I think you should still ask him out. Worst case is he says no.’

‘Okay look I’ll— I’ll think about it,’ Ka’harja felt his gut wrench— Then realised it was just the caravan stopping again.

Distro noticed, too. ‘Looks like we found a new campsite. Want to head out and set up?’

Ka’harja shrugged. ‘Not really.’

‘Yeah you do, come on,’ Distro grabbed her son’s arm and dragged him towards the door. ‘I’ll sit you down next to Coborn and you can chew on her ingredients while she’s not looking.’

‘I’m not going to do that to her,’ Ka’harja felt himself smile. ‘She’d probably end up crying, thinking there are rats in the storage caravan or something.’

‘Well, then, you can at least sit by the fire and watch the sunset,’ Distro decided as she leapt down the steps into the wet grass. ‘Instead of moping about inside like a lump.’

‘I *like* being a lump though,’ Ka’harja replied, following more slowly. ‘Lumps don’t have responsibilities.’

‘Sure they do!’ Distro replied. ‘Lumps have to keep their mother company while

she cleans the dishes. And they have to eat their vegetables. And they have to collect the firewood and make sure dinner doesn't burn.'

A giggle escaped Ka'harja as his mother dragged him over to talk to Coborn.

'Coborn, honey, you look like you slept on a rock,' Distro blurted.

'I— What?' Coborn looked up from the freshly-started fire and glanced awkwardly from Ka'harja to his mother and back. 'Th.... Thanks?'

'You need to relax,' Distro replied, putting one hand on the cook's face and fixing her messy bun with the other. 'Take some time off. Have a bath and soak your hair in unicorn oil.'

'I can't afford unicorn oil,' Coborn blushed. She looked torn— Like she wanted to pull away and run, but also like she wanted to collapse into the alchemist's arms and never get up again.

'I have a bottle I can give you,' Distro replied, continuing to fix Coborn's hair. 'It's not got much left in it, but it would do you some good to use it.'

'Mum, a bit of personal space?' Ka'harja suggested.

'Oh, piss off,' Distro laughed. 'Coborn doesn't mind, do you love?'

Slowly, Coborn shook her head. 'No, ma'am. I— Oh!'

Ka'harja hadn't noticed the ladle slipping from Coborn's hand until she'd dropped it — She tried to catch it but fumbled and accidentally knocked it into the fire.

'Oh, Scara—' she reached a hand in to grab it, but pulled away as the hot flames sparked at her. '*Dammit!*'

'Honey, it's alright,' Distro pet her on the shoulder and then carelessly reached into the flames. She pulled the ladle out and wiped the soot on her pants before holding it out to the cook.

Coborn stared at it for a moment and Ka'harja could swear he saw literal sparkles in her eyes— Which he quickly realised was firelight reflecting off the tears that were forming in the corners.

It took Distro giving the ladle a gentle shake for Coborn to take it back.

'What's that look for?' Distro asked with a snort.

'I— You're— I— Klict,' Coborn managed. 'You really are....'

*Klict.*

Ka'harja looked from the cook to his mother and swallowed. Coborn was right, wasn't she? His mother was blessed by Klict.... Did that make her special? Was she some sort of magical disciple of the gods, now?

Then he saw the look on Distro's face and remembered the time she'd tried to swallow a plum whole and choked, and the idea of her being anything but his mother shot from his brain like the plum had from her mouth.

'She's not Klict,' he blurted. 'She's just a dumb foxen woman like you or me. I mean, you're not dumb. And I'm not a woman— I'm dumb and you're a woman? Do you see my point?'

'N.... No?' Coborn blinked. Then she looked back to Distro and blushed. 'Sorry I— I didn't mean it that way it's just— You're amazing. And not just because you summoned Klict.'

Distro shrugged and turned away. Then her ears perked up and she sighed. 'Oh,

Baku, that log is *far* too big for you to move alone.'

Before Ka'harja could respond, his mother marched off towards Baku, who was struggling to roll a log towards the fire.

'Baku, you idiot!' she called. 'You need at least two people to push that! Let me help!'

'Coff said you're not to do heavy lifting!' Baku retorted.

'I'll heavy lift you in a minute!' Distro replied loudly.

'That doesn't make any sense!'

'*Bleh blah blah bleh!*' Distro mocked as she pushed Baku aside and lifted a leg to give the log a kick.

Ka'harja did *not* expect it to come flying at him and knock him down. But apparently it did.

His mother gave a horrified cry as the log collided with him and hurried over to push it off.

'Sweetheart! I'm so sorry!' she exclaimed. 'Are you okay?'

'That was... *amazing!*' Ka'harja managed. 'How did you do that?!'

'I...' Distro trailed off. 'I don't know. I didn't even kick it that hard? I didn't think I did?'

Ka'harja sat up, fast and stiff, and grinned at his mother. 'You're strong as *fuck*, now! You're *so fucking strong!* Great Star that's *cool!*'

'DISTRO!' the angry cry came from a voice that *should* have been familiar, but somehow wasn't.

It took Ka'harja a minute to realise who the voice had come from— He saw Coff marching over to his mother and almost flinched away. He'd never heard the healer so angry!

'What— What w-was that?' Coff exclaimed. 'WHAT! Was that!'

Distro shrugged.

'*Go to bed!*' Coff demanded, pointing back to his caravan.

'Coff—' Coborn started, then cut off. She rubbed her hand along her collarbone and blushed. 'Coff she...'

'She's *awesome!*' Baku exclaimed. 'Did you see that?!'

'Y-Y-Yes I did!' Coff replied, still fuming. 'I d-don't c-care how ama-ama— How amazing it w-was! Sh-She's st-still sick! *Bed!*'

'I'm fine,' Distro protested.

'*Now!*'

'Oof, alright,' rolling her eyes, Distro turned to Coborn. 'Cook fast so I can come back out sooner?'

'Bed!' Coff exclaimed, stepping between the two girls. 'Now!'

'Alright, I'm *going!*' Distro raised her hands in a submissive gesture and shrugged. 'Back to bed— Ka, Sweetheart, come get me when dinners ready?'

'Stop st-stalling!' Coff grunted, stepping around Distro again to get between her and her son. 'And g-g-go—'

'I'm not *stalling!*' Distro huffed and headed off the way she'd come before. Coff trailed her closely as she continued complaining. 'Do you think I would *stall?*'

'Y-Yes! I d-do!' Coff's voice exclaimed as the pair disappeared behind one of the caravans. 'You— You would st-stall not st-starving if you thought some-someone was t-telling you what to do!'

'I eat on my own terms.'

Ka'harja twitched his ears as his mother began berating the healer, and bit his lip. He'd never heard Coff yell like that before. He'd thought the man more likely to burst into tears than argue with his mother.

'Wow, haven't seen him do that since he was in his apprenticeship!' Baku snickered. 'He hates raising his voice. But I'm not surprised. Your mother— Well... Nothing else seems to work with her.'

'That was...' Ka'harja felt himself blush. He folded back his ears and dropped his voice to a whisper. '*Why was that hot?*'

'Wow, so you *are* foxen!' Baku blurted. 'Don't worry, your *secret crush* is safe with us. Right, Coborn?'

Coborn giggled, though she tried to smother it as she turned back to the fire and quickly began organising her tools.

'What are you thinking?' Baku gave her a cheeky grin and sauntered to her side. When she didn't answer, he poked her cheeks and repeated himself. '*What are you thinking?*'

Coborn glanced back to Ka'harja, her face darkening in her own blush, before she quickly whispered in Baku's ear.

'HAH!' Baku barked a laugh and nodded. 'I knew that already.'

Ka'harja sighed when Baku gave him a happy nod. 'That I'm gay?' he guessed.

'Oh, shit, you're *gay?*' Baku exclaimed as Coborn's mouth dropped in surprise. 'That's *even better!* Do you *actually* like Coff?'

'Uh...' Ka'harja wasn't sure what to say to that. He'd thought the two would have already heard from Koko, or Stars, or Coff, or Sken or Dena or Distro— Anyone, really, that he was gay. But the grins that spread over the foxens' faces told Ka'harja they *hadn't* known....

So what had Coborn whispered to Baku?

'Man, you *do!*' Baku clapped his hands together. 'Tell him! No— Seriously— Tell him. He'll love hearing it!'

'I'm not— No!' Ka'harja felt himself blushing and leapt to his feet. 'I don't like him, okay?'

'*Because you love him,*' Coborn murmured, so quietly Ka'harja almost missed it.

'Hey!' Ka'harja whined as the cook giggled.

'*Welp*, I better go check on Coff,' Baku pushed back his mess of a hairstyle and snorted. 'Distro's likely to dump another cup of water on him. And he needs to be *presentable* when you confess your *undying love* to him tonight.'

'I'm not— I'm not—' Ka'harja couldn't get the words out. He desperately wanted to argue with Baku as he walked away, but he just *couldn't*. He was too embarrassed, and flustered, and Baku was too right.

*Damn it.*

Coborn's continuous giggling caught Ka'harja's attention and he turned to her with



a heavy sigh. She grinned back at him, though it was obvious she was trying really hard to cover it as she lifted the heavy, half-filled cooking pot over the fire and threw in a handful of chopped carrots.

'Baku's not going to tell him,' Coborn reassured. 'And neither will I. That's not our business.... But *you* should.'

'I... I don't know,' Ka'harja couldn't meet Coborn's eye. Was there any point in telling Coff? He'd had a girlfriend before. He wouldn't be interested.

'Tell him,' Coborn pressed, flicking her ears back and giving him a gentle nod. 'What's the worst that could happen?'

Ka'harja shrugged. *What was the worst that could happen?* He embarrasses himself? He loses a friend?

He didn't like the idea of that.

'Tell him,' Coborn repeated. She flicked him with her tail and gave him a smile— It was weak, but warm and genuine, and he felt a little less stupid. 'He won't be upset.'

'Maybe,' replied Ka'harja. 'Maybe.... I'm going to head off and... do stuff. You have... fun? Cooking. Like I mean, don't burn yourself or anything. I mean— Not that I think you would I just— I'm... dumb. I'm dumb. Have a good day.'

'You too,' Coborn replied as Ka'harja hurried away.

He wasn't sure exactly where he was going. He just knew he couldn't bear to talk about his crush on Coff again.

Maybe he could head down to the river? Or maybe he could—

*Oh, Trat does not look good,* Ka'harja sucked in a sharp breath through his teeth as he caught sight of the man.

He was sitting with Lif behind one of the caravans, looking pale and sick and like he'd been crying. Ka'harja wasn't sure what to do. Should he leave them alone? Should he say something? Trat had tried to help him before, so maybe....

Lif looked over, and Ka'harja gave an awkward wave. He received a slow shake of the head in response, and so he quickly turned away and slipped back into the main part of camp, leaving the boys to themselves.

He let out a long breath as he rounded one of the caravans, and almost walked into Naranako.

'Oh. You saw Trat, huh?' Naranako licked his painted lips and pulled a knowing face. '*Yeah*. Felelor said he's having a hard time and to leave him alone, so....'

'What happened?' Ka'harja asked. 'I've never seen him like that before.'

'Uh, well,' Naranako rubbed his arm. 'He was the one who found the sheep. I think it brought back some bad memories— He used to farm them. And... with the whole... fire thing....'

'Oh,' Ka'harja felt something drop, like his heart had fallen from its place in his chest and into his stomach. 'Yeah. That would— That would suck.'

'*Yeaaaaaah,*' drawling out the word, Naranako licked his lips again, and Ka'harja noticed the colour was fading. 'I haven't seen anything trigger him like this in a long time. I think everything's been getting to him. Your house. The fight with the Har'pies. Those sheep.... I saw him scratching at his scars before. Hasn't done that in a while.'

'Ah...' Ka'harja wasn't sure what to say.

And as it seemed, neither did Naranako. He just nodded and pursed his lips and shuffled his feet. 'I should go help Felelor. He was going to... do stuff.'

Ka'harja was familiar with that excuse, having used it only a few minutes ago himself, and let the red-haired man duck past him and hurry away.

For a minute Ka'harja stood in place like an idiot. He wasn't entirely sure what to do. Then he saw Coff milling about in much the same way and took a deep breath.

Maybe they could talk....

If Ka'harja could get his legs to move.

*Move! Ka'harja willed himself. Move, you stupid lump!*

Then Coff met his eye and started towards him and he realised he wasn't really a lump— He was more like jelly. Wobbly, anxious jelly that wanted to melt into a puddle on the ground and pretend it wasn't there.

'Hey, K-Ka'harja,' Coff gave him a friendly grin.

'Mum says you're a nerd,' Ka'harja blurted. Then he mentally kicked himself. 'I mean— She says that you write books.'

Coff's friendly smile disappeared and was replaced by wide eyes. 'N-Nerd? She s-said that?'

'She was just playing. And I mean— *I* don't think you're a nerd!' Ka'harja stammered. He realised how stiff he was standing and tried to make some sort of motion with his hand against his chest. He had no idea what it was, but it made Coff stare at him. 'I like books. I mean, I don't like reading. But I like books. I just have trouble reading? I can't focus on them.'

Were his hand motions too exaggerated now? Maybe standing still was better.

*SHIT!*

Now he was too stiff again....

For a moment, Coff stared at him. Then the healer looked to the ground and cleared his throat. 'W-Well, ADH— ADHD c-can make it-it-it— Make it hard to read s-sometimes.'

'Makes sense,' Ka'harja managed. 'So... what do you write about?'

'Uh...' red crept over Coff's cheeks and he pressed his ears back. 'F.... Fantasy. And r-r-romance.'

'I like romance,' Ka'harja tried to smile, though he wasn't sure if it was pleasant or if it was too toothy. 'Romance.... Romance. Romance?'

'Y-Yes,' Coff confirmed. 'Romance.'

'Romance. Romance. Romance...' Ka'harja wanted to scream. Why couldn't he say something else? *Okay*. He was going to say something else. He was going to say something about alchemy. About how interesting enhanceive healing was, and how wound-closing potions only worked temporarily before the wounds opened up again. And he could talk about how cool it was that you could grow back limbs over time— And how uncool the side effects of doing so could be. Coff would know about that and it would be fun to talk about how much their professions intersected with one another. 'So like... *romance?*'

'Yeah,' Coff wrung his hands. 'Romance.... I uh, n-never really got a— A lot of it. So...'

'Oh, yeah, your girlfriend,' Ka'harja wished he was repeating *romance* again, but he couldn't seem to stop himself as he continued, 'Coborn said she threw a vase at her— I mean, that your girlfriend threw a vase at Coborn, not the other way around. Can you *imagine* Coborn throwing something at someone? I can't.'

Coff just shrugged.

'So what was she like?' Ka'harja asked. 'Your ex, not Coborn. I know what Coborn is like. She's nice. Your ex though? Obviously not fun. How'd you two end up together?'

'Well, uh... h-her name was Tis-Tis-Tis— Her name was Tisimi,' Coff let out a long, nervous breath and his hands moved to his shoulders. 'Tisimi Tykia. She was h-half w-wolven. With th-the height to p-prove it.'

*Tall*, Ka'harja remembered Coff's preference.

'Sh-She uh...' Coff stammered. 'Appr-Appr— Approached me at a— At a p-park and said— Said w-we were g-going to d-date. And— And I was too sc-scared to say n-no.'

'Oh,' Ka'harja flicked his tail against Coff, trying to express his sympathy. 'That sucks. Sorry to hear that.... She just *demand*ed you date her?'

Coff nodded.

'That stinks.'

Gods, why had he said that? There had to be a better response. Anything would have been better than *that*!

'Y-Yeah,' Coff's mouth twitched into a smile, and Ka'harja was surprised that he'd somehow managed to say the right thing. 'It— It *stunk*. A-A lot.'

'How'd you manage to break up with her?'

'I— Uh.... I didn't,' Coff admitted, flushing red. 'Sk-Sken offered me a j-job and.... And I t-took it....'

'Oh, you just left?' Ka'harja asked. He tried to smile back as Coff nodded. 'Hey, same here. Running away from problems and not looking back is pretty much my whole thing!'

Coff just kept nodding. He looked like he wanted to say something, but Ka'harja wasn't sure what it was as he bobbed his head up and down over and over and bit his lip.

'So... you been with anyone since your ex?' Ka'harja asked. 'Or just her? If you're even looking, I mean. Do you like anyone?'

That stopped Coff from nodding. His cheeks went so red Ka'harja wasn't sure he was still breathing. Then he cleared his throat and looked to the ground and licked his lips anxiously. 'Y-Yes. I.... I like someone.'

'Really? Who?' Ka'harja asked. He couldn't stop a little bubble of jealousy forming in his chest... whoever it was had *no idea* how lucky they were! He waited for Coff to respond, but the poor man fumbled with his words so much Ka'harja had to put a hand on his shoulder and remind him to breathe. 'It's fine. You don't have to say.'

'N-No, it's... uh.... I like—'

'No, don't tell me. I'm better off not knowing,' Ka'harja interrupted. 'I'd probably just blurt it to them like a moron!'

Coff swallowed. 'No, Ka'harja, it's— It's— It's y—'

'It's fine,' Ka'harja reassured. 'Look, I'll head off. I've obviously.... I'm stressing you

out. Sorry for all the questions.'

'Ka— *Ugh...*' Coff gave a defeated shrug as Ka'harja waved goodbye.

Unsure where to head after so many awkward conversations, Ka'harja quickly scanned the camp and spotted Coborn— Who was staring at him with a... he wasn't exactly sure what kind of expression.

He figured talking to her was better than turning around to Coff again, and quickly hurried over.

'What's wrong?' he asked. 'What's with the face?'

'It's— Nothing,' Coborn turned back to her food. She began chopping some sort of green vegetable Ka'harja would never have chosen to eat on his own, and sighed. 'So... Did you ask Coff out?'

'No,' Ka'harja let out a sigh of his own. 'No point. He has a crush on someone.'

Coborn took in a sharp breath and bit her lip. Her chopping got louder and she focused so hard she frowned. 'Did he tell you... *who*, exactly?'

'He tried, but had trouble. So I told him it was fine,' Ka'harja shrugged. 'Figured if I knew I'd probably tell them by accident.'

'*Scara!*' Coborn chopped so hard her grip on her knife slipped, and she barely missed her fingers. 'Absolutely useless!'

'No you're not,' Ka'harja put a hand on her back. 'You're a good cook.'

'I wasn't—' she took a deep breath as her hand met her tattoo, and let it out again slowly. 'Not talking about myself.'

'The knife?' Ka'harja guessed.

She paused for a moment. '*Yeah*. Sure. The knife.'

Ka'harja wasn't sure why she was using that sort of tone. It was definitely a contrast to the conversation they'd had about ten minutes before. She seemed... upset.

'Are you okay?' he managed.

'Fine,' Coborn replied. 'Just a little frustrated.'

'Should I ask what about?' Ka'harja hoped he sounded like he was offering support, and not making fun of her.

'You really just walked off on Coff, huh?' her voice was so flat it felt as harsh as Koko's angry glare, and Ka'harja flinched away.

'Is... Is that why you're upset? I didn't mean to be rude to him I just— He seemed stressed and I didn't want to make it worse so...'

'You should have let him finish what he had to say, at least,' Coborn replied with a sigh. 'People *never* listen to him.'

'Sorry,' Ka'harja rubbed the back of his neck. He glanced back to where he and Coff had been talking, but the healer was gone. 'I should say that to him though, shouldn't I?'

Coborn nodded. 'He likes you a lot, you know. He said... He told me you talk *to* him. Not *at* him. It's rare he finds someone patient enough to listen.'

Ka'harja shrugged. He'd never considered that before. Coff just... had a lot of interesting things to say. There wasn't any reason to *not* listen to him, usually.

He realised Coborn had a point. It probably hurt a *lot* that Ka'harja had cut him off before. Especially since it was something so personal he was trying to share.

Before Ka'harja could say anything, Coborn shook her head and pulled her hand

from her collarbone— And Ka'harja finally caught a glance of her small, dark pink heart tattoo before she readjusted her shirt again.

'So...' Ka'harja blurted. 'Who do you think it is that Coff likes?'

Coborn just stared at him like he was an idiot.

'Oh, I suppose it'd be obvious to you, wouldn't it?' Ka'harja rubbed the back of his neck again. 'You've known him so long. I imagine you can tell who it is.'

'Yes he.... He told me who,' Coborn replied. She refused to meet Ka'harja's eye and focused on her cooking instead, pulling out a pile of weird-looking vegetables and packets of herbs that Ka'harja only sort-of recognised as ingredients to a few pick-me-ups he might have made in his own profession.

'Who?' Ka'harja asked. 'Or, I mean.... I guess you can't really say, huh? None of my business. But I'm curious— It's not Koko, is it? She's not really his type, plus the whole Baku thing.'

'No it's... *not Koko*,' Coborn confirmed, continuing to avoid eye-contact. Then she gave a humoured snort before finally putting down the food and half-looking at Ka'harja. 'But now I'm curious.... Who do you think it is?'

Ka'harja hesitated. Who *did* he think it was? It wasn't Coborn herself— She'd probably not keep it a secret, and how absolutely *disgusted* she'd seemed when he suggested they'd dated before was pretty telling how the two saw each other. Koko was not it. Maybe it was Annanyn. Did Annanyn seem his type? Maybe. Although... he couldn't imagine Coff being able to look Sken in the eye if he liked Annanyn. Did he like Sken? Not likely. She was terrifying. And he was timid. Not his type at all.

That was all the caravaners.

Was it even one of the caravaners?

He looked at Coborn, who stared back. After a moment of silence he sat on the log beside Coborn and clasp his hands tightly, trying to think.

*Maybe it's not a caravaner*, he thought. *If it was, would he be so nervous? Or would he just tell them? He knew them all well enough to tell them that sort of thing, didn't he?*

So... that left.... Dena, Distro, and Stars.

Dena was old. Like, in her fifties. And she looked old. And she acted old. And she was tired and grumpy and didn't really talk to anyone much, let alone *Coff*....

And his mother was also older.... Not as old as Dena. She was only in her mid-thirties.... But she was still way too old for Coff to be interested. At least, he *hoped* she was too old for Coff to be interested. Because that would be an actual *nightmare*.

So that left Stars.

Stars.

Ka'harja could see that. Stars was sweet. And considerate. And she spent a lot of time with Coff. It wouldn't be surprising if he had feelings for her.

'I think.... I think I know,' Ka'harja muttered.

'Oh, thank the Goddess,' Coborn gave a relieved sigh and grinned. 'It took a while, but you finally see it? It's so obvious how much he likes yo—'

'I can't believe he's into Stars!' Ka'harja exclaimed.

'*What?*'

'I have to go!' he blurted. 'I have to find Stars *right now!*'

'Ka'harja!' Coborn called after Ka'harja as he bolted away. 'Ka'harja we just talked about walking away halfway through— UGH! NEVER-MIND! *FORGET IT!*'

He thought he should turn around and go back for a moment, but then again, he figured there was not really any point. He'd apologise later, after he talked to Stars about

—

Shit. What was he even going to say to her about it?

He stopped hurrying around camp and took a deep breath.

He couldn't just... tell Stars that Coff liked her, could he? That'd be as unfair as Baku and Coborn telling Coff about *his* crush.

Should he maybe find Coff then, and ask Coff? That sounded like a better plan.

'Hey Ka'harja, are you alright?'

He nearly jumped out of his skin as Annanyn put a hand on his back.

*Great Star!* Could he not go *anywhere* in this place without someone trying to talk to him?!

'Yeah, I'm fine,' he lied. 'Just... thinking.'

'About Coff?' Annanyn asked.

'Wh— What makes you think that?'

'I saw you two talking. It looked awkward,' she gave him a sympathetic smile and readjusted Little Demon in her arms— Ka'harja had almost missed the tiny little lad until he'd let out a tired murmur.

'Hey, you little fucker,' Ka'harja couldn't help bending down and smooching the boy's nose.

'Don't call him that!' Annanyn gasped, quickly planting her own kisses over the baby. 'You're not a *swear-word!* You're a *brave little man!*'

Ka'harja couldn't help but giggle. 'I mean, I'm not good with kids, but I'm pretty sure it's okay to swear in front of a one-month-old. He's not going to repeat it!'

'You're right, you're *not* good with kids,' Annanyn scoffed. When she was done rolling her eyes her smile returned, creasing her chubby cheeks against her eyes in a cheeky grin as she gave her fins a happy flick. 'I'm so lucky Stars is letting me look after him. I can't wait to adopt my own little *cutie!*'

'Right, coz you and Sken are both girls!' Ka'harja blurted. 'I mean— Well yeah.... Because of that.'

He was glad Annanyn had a sense of humour.

'Yes,' she giggled. 'Unless the gods put a child in me, I really doubt it's going to happen any other way.'

'Right,' Ka'harja coughed. 'So.... How is Sken? I haven't seen her all day.'

'Busy,' Annanyn replied, her shoulders sagging as she sighed. 'I haven't seen her much, either.'

'Sounds lonely,' he wasn't sure if he should put a hand on her shoulder? Maybe.... *Oh gods why was she so sticky?!*

Ka'harja remembered she was a secas at the last moment, and swallowed the sick feeling that her slimy skin left in his chest.

This was a mistake. But he couldn't just take his hand away, now.

Maybe a quick pat?

*Pat pat.*

Was that enough pats?

Maybe he should....

*Pat.*

That seemed about right.

‘Are you sure you’re okay?’ Annanyn asked carefully. ‘You don’t seem okay.’

‘I’m fine,’ he repeated his lie, though this time it came out a little less confident.

And this time, it was obvious Annanyn didn’t believe him.

‘Would you like to come sit with me?’ she offered. ‘In my caravan. I have to double check the books —stock and stuff— and it’d be nice to have some company. We don’t have to talk or anything.’

‘Uh, sure,’ Ka’harja liked the idea of that. Just quietly blending into the background was when he felt most comfortable.

Annanyn nodded and then, as if to prove she wasn’t going to bother him by talking, turned around without another word and began her way back to her private caravan.

She held the door open for Ka’harja, who wasn’t sure if his quiet thank-you was heard. But he was too embarrassed to repeat himself and instead plopped himself down on the floor next to the bathtub-bed and rubbed the tense muscles in his neck.

Annanyn took her place at a small, book-covered desk that resembled Coff’s and began carefully moving stacks of paper from a nearby shelf onto her workspace. She kept Little Demon in her lap as she worked; gently keeping one hand rested on him as she scribbled away.

Ka’harja felt... awkward, sitting in silence. He knew Annanyn had said they didn’t have to talk but he— He actually sort of *wanted* to talk to her? He couldn’t believe it. Just a month ago if she’d come over he’d have retreated into the pantry and hidden away to avoid talking. Now he had the urge to start a conversation with her....

Would it be rude to talk while she was working? Should he say something or should he keep quiet?

He watched her write for a few more minutes before finally deciding to say something.

‘That’s a lot of math,’ he offered. ‘I’m not too good at math. I know that’s not the best thing to hear from an alchemist but.... Uh.... I’ve just never been able to sit down and focus long enough to figure it out. You know?’

‘Oh, yes, I understand *completely!*’ Annanyn’s excited tone reassured Ka’harja he’d made the right choice as she turned in her chair and raised her gills. ‘I used to be *terrible* at it! So terrible my parents actually considered sending me to the Gallamor to study! But luckily for me, while my surrogate was looking into it my genitor got offered a job in Dr’oy, and they forgot about it during the move. I wasn’t going to remind them, so I was spared. Until I got fired from my first job for *math-related reasons*. Then my surrogate lost xer mind! Xie started talking about sending me to boarding school again, so I faked a job offer from a company in Canis La’Can. I’d say it was a mistake, because that place was *cold*, but I met Sken there, so not really. And— *And*.... I just blurted all that out, didn’t I?’

'Keep going,' Ka'harja grinned. 'How'd you and Sken meet? I want to hear it!'

The look on Annanyn's face was well worth the high-pitch scree that escaped her gills as she giggled. 'Well, I met Sken a couple of months after moving to La'Can! I was looking for a place to stay, but not many people wanted to give board to a sixteenth-eclipser without a job— And not many places wanted to give a job to someone without a mailing address. So I... may have stolen a few wallets and tried to fake being a lady called Luronne.'

Ka'harja was so shocked he almost laughed. He couldn't believe Annanyn had ever broken the law! She always seemed so sweet! But here she was, lying to her parents, running away from home, stealing wallets and— '*You stole someone's identity?*'

'Tried to. Only she was pretty well-known, so it didn't work. I was just lucky she didn't press charges,' Annanyn shook her head and grinned. 'I was legally an adult by secas law, and old enough to live alone by wolgen law, so if she hadn't had a sense of humour I could have ended up in jail!'

'Shit, you were a *rebel!*' Ka'harja almost wanted to tell her his own wild adventures stealing and lying his way through life— But bit his tongue. He'd stolen from *her*, after all. It was a bit more awkward to explain than stealing from a complete stranger.... Though she'd been a stranger when he'd done it.

'*Don't swear in front of the baby!*' Annanyn scolded in a hushed voice. Though, she grinned again as she continued, 'Needless to say, they booked me a boat back to Dr'oy. Which I missed four times before they gave up on me. Then I saw Felelor again— Oh, I don't think I told you how we met?'

'I don't think I've heard it, no,' Ka'harja chuckled. *Had he?* He didn't remember hearing about it, but... it also didn't sound *completely* unfamiliar. *Maybe he had?*

'We met when I was on the boat heading to Canis,' Annanyn flicked her gills and smiled widely. 'We were attacked by valenor, and he saved my life. He almost got himself killed, doing it.... But when he saw me again he was an absolute sweetheart and let me stay at his place while he was recovering from his injuries. In return I had to do things for him that he couldn't do. Like getting groceries. The local shopkeepers shadowed me whenever I *dared* set foot in their stores, though, and apparently Felelor got a few letters about what I'd done.'

'Ooh, *letters?*'

'Yeah,' Annanyn giggled. 'I don't think he really cared too much. I'm grateful for that, because it got cold really fast and I was a stubborn teenager.... I would have frozen before I went home. It was actually one of the cold days I met Sken! I went to the market to pick up potatoes with Naranako and bumped into her in the crowd.... I remember the look she gave me; I think she just fell in love with me on the spot. She offered to carry my bags— Sort of. She was really flustered and couldn't get the words out, and it was cute, so I asked if she wanted to walk with us and, well.... Two years later we got married and started travelling.... Oh, Scara. This was meant to be about math! I'm so sorry. If I even *think* of Sken I just sort of... get distracted.'

'You tell stories like I do,' Ka'harja chuckled.

Annanyn's cheeks blushed a deep green and she bit her lip. 'So much for not talking, huh?'



'I started it, and I really enjoyed hearing about your life!' he replied, moving to sit on his tail so Annanyn wouldn't see it wagging— But he realised too late that he'd only brought attention to it, and looked away as Annanyn giggled. 'Hey— Uh, maybe a bit personal, but in all honesty... I've never been in a good relationship before and I was curious.... What do you two do when you fight? *If you've ever fought before?* I always seem to fall out with my boyfriends over one thing or another. Any advice?'

'We disagree on plenty of things,' Annanyn's impish grin returned and she leant in close. 'But usually I just compliment her muscles and she caves and lets me get my way.'

'Somehow, I don't feel that would work for me,' Ka'harja gave a dramatic sigh that ended with an involuntary giggle. 'But yeah, I've seen you do that to your *wuvly Skenny-poo!*'

'Shh!' Annanyn covered her mouth and clamped down her gills, trying to muffle her snicker. 'Great Star, Ka'harja! Don't! She'll hear you!'

'*Weally? You weally weally tink so?*' Ka'harja teased. '*Your big stwong kelp knot will hear me? Wot will she do to me?*'

'I'll beat the living shit out of you, is what!' Sken's voice nearly gave Ka'harja a heart attack.

He was on his feet before she managed to shut the door, and was halfway to the back of the room before Annanyn made it the three steps forward to kiss her wife.

'You're done setting up camp?' she asked, a desperate hint in her voice as she buried her face into Sken's chest. 'I've missed you!'

'I've missed you too, puddle-hopper. *Sorry today was so long,*' Sken whispered into the top of Annanyn's head. She breathed her in for a long moment before pulling away and turning to Ka'harja, her dreamy eyes turning into a death-glare as she flicked her barbed tail in his direction. 'If I *ever* hear you call me "kelp knot" again....'

'I understand.'

Sken gave a humoured snort before putting her arms back around Annanyn and grinning. 'I caught you a walleye.'

'Skewered it with your tail?' Annanyn's freckles lit up as she stood on her toes and tried to nip Sken's cheek.

'Nope! Punched it!' Sken flexed her arms. 'One hit and it was out!'

'Scara, you're *so strong!*'

Ka'harja felt like he should leave. But the girls were standing in front of the only exit.

It didn't really matter, though, because before he could consider his next move Sken turned back to him and blurted, 'So Baku said you have a crush? Is that what all that moping around has been about?'

He wished he was dead.

'You *do?*' Annanyn gasped. And before anyone else could say anything, she let out another. '*Coff!*'

He didn't have the energy to argue, and just sunk to the floor again.

'Oh, that's why you two have been so awkward!' Sken's gills screeched a laugh as she joined Ka'harja on the floor. 'You should tell him.'

'So people keep saying...' Ka'harja almost continued, but there was a knock on the

caravan's door and Stars called to Annanyn, too quickly for Ka'harja to catch *exactly* what she'd said, but cheerful enough that he wasn't surprised when Sken shouted for her to come in.

'Is he in here?' Stars asked. Before anyone could answer she saw Annanyn, holding her baby, and her face broke into a wide smile and she held out all four of her arms. 'Oh, my taa'han Little Demon! I missed you bini much, farfah katka! Annanyn! Thank you for looking after him, Annanyn! It was very nice of you! Eewowm.'

Ka'harja watched as Stars embraced Annanyn tightly. Then he heard a *clump* behind him as Sken's tail hit the wall— No, she'd *stabbed* the wall. He dared a glance at her face and could swear he caught her jealous glare before she forced a grin to her lips and pushed herself up.

'She's the best, isn't she?' Sken put an arm around her wife and eased between the girls, separating the two from their hug as she pulled Annanyn protectively against her side.

'Oh, no,' Annanyn reached a hand around Sken, and Ka'harja saw her smack her wife's twitching tail-barb before resting her hand on Sken's hip. 'It's selfish, really. I *enjoy* looking after him!'

'That's mip and good! It would be really sad if you didn't like him. Because he's wonderful and perfect and I love him a whole lot!' Stars lifted her baby into the air and gave a wide smile as he blubbered happily. 'Do you understand, my Little Demon? I kosson you lots! You are the mip kama tia'fio that was ever born!'

Sken let out a genuine laugh before letting go of her wife and putting her hand on Stars' shoulder instead. 'He's fantastic. How's his weight going?'

'He's gained a lot! Coff said he's much healthier then he was before! Very mip!' Stars grinned— But then her face fell, and she pulled her son close and shivered. 'But he's still worried because.... Dassen milk is full of a lot of nutrients. And I'm nurlak. And it's all so scary because Coff says if I can't feed him properly he could get sick again. And if he gets sick he might break and be mup parsa.... And I don't want him to die. I want to keep him....'

Sken's arms found their way around Stars, and stayed that way for a long while before Stars sniffed and pulled away to wipe her eyes.

'But he's not sick,' Stars said firmly. 'And he's not parsa. And he's going to be okay and get big and strong, and I'm going to make sure he's happy and— And Koko and Baku and Coborn and Krarf are teaching me about everything, so that I can teach him when he's old enough. Like how to cook and read and sing!'

'Sounds great,' Ka'harja grinned.

'Oh!' Stars jumped. 'Ka'harja! I didn't see you! I'm sorry. I would have said abbttoh and hugged you if I saw you.... Are you okay? You look sad.'

Ka'harja shrugged. 'It's been a big day.'

'Oh, I know what those are like,' Stars nodded and folded down her ears. 'And Baku said you've got a secret kosson.'

He almost swore. *Why* was Baku telling everyone about his crush? He wished the man wouldn't....

'I didn't tell him it was Coff, in case he didn't know. But I think he might have

known.'

'You— What?' sputtering, Ka'harja found his feet and began pacing. 'How is everyone guessing? It's not *that* obvious, is it?'

'Yi. It is,' Stars confirmed. 'You get really nervous and blush a lot when he's around, and you smile when you talk about him. Even more then when you talk about your kekik Distro! And you smile a *lot* when you talk about your kekik Distro. It is easy to see he makes your esiba go gighi!'

Annanyng giggled as Sken cast her a cheeky glance, and Ka'harja felt more self-conscious than he could ever remember feeling before.

'You should tell him!' Stars blurted, much to Sken's amusement. 'It's dinner and everyone is getting food from Coborn, so he'll be there too!'

'What's the point?' Ka'harja sighed. 'He's not gay.'

'How do you know that?' Sken asked with an amused scoff.

'Have I ever been that lucky?'

'But you won't know until you ask!' Stars exclaimed. 'Oh— Or I can ask him for you! My kekik says you're a coward and that you're kizza taa'han enough to do things and always avoid doing things you should do— And this is something you should do! So it makes sense that you're avoiding it! So I'm going to be a mip friend, and I'm going to tell Coff for you! Obbtah!'

'*NO!*' the word was barely out of his mouth by the time Stars was out the door. He tripped down the stairs as he tried to follow her and couldn't help letting out a defeated cry as his leg cramped. All he could do was roll over uselessly as Stars disappeared into camp.

Sken's hand appeared at his side as he wallowed in the grass, and he almost refused to take it until she bent down further and laughed at him.

'Come on,' she said as she helped him up. 'Coff's always late to eat. We can meet her at the fire and convince her to keep quiet.'

He wasn't sure he had the energy.... But he followed Sken anyway.

Sken was right, Coff wasn't at dinner yet. But everyone was watching Stars curiously as she glanced around, so quick Ka'harja couldn't keep up with where she was looking.

'Pebble, what's wrong?' Dena asked.

'I'm looking for Coff,' Stars explained. 'I have to tell him something important! I have to tell him that—'

'*NO!*' Ka'harja exclaimed, rushing to her and throwing his hand over her mouth. 'Don't— Just— *Don't!*'

Stars stumbled for a moment before rolling her eyes and pushing Ka'harja off her. 'Why?'

'Because!'

'Because *why?*'

'It's my business!'

'It's his business too.'

'No! No it's *not!*' Ka'harja felt himself blushing hot as the caravaners stared at him. He could see Baku and Coborn giggling together by the cooking pot, and wished he'd just

left his mother to sleep in instead of starting all this stupid drama and embarrassing himself like an idiot. 'It's *nobody's* business but mine!'

'Is everything okay?' Lif asked, sliding between him and Stars as if to protect her. 'You're acting... *weird*, man. Is something up?'

'He's in love with—'

'NO!' Ka'harja almost knocked Lif to the ground as he flew past him and slammed his hand over Stars' mouth again. 'NO!'

'In love?' Lif asked, frowning. 'With *who*?'

There was a shout, and Naranako leapt around camp, clapping his hands and whooping. 'I KNEW IT! I KNEW IT! I fucking *called it!*'

'What's going on?' Distro asked, rounding the caravan with— Ka'harja almost choked when he saw Coff at her side.

And he knew everyone else saw Coff, too, because the caravan went silent.

Dead silent.

Except for Stars, who pulled away from Ka'harja and called out, 'Coff! Are you gay?'

Coff stopped in his tracks and stared. 'Wha— Why?'

Ka'harja made to cover her mouth again, but she dodged with surprising speed and rushed to the healer's side.

'Because Ka'harja is in love with you!' she blurted. 'But he's too scared to say so in case you're not gay and don't love him back! So are you gay? And do you love Ka'harja back?'

Coff looked from Stars, to Ka'harja, to Stars, to Ka'harja, to the rest of the caravaners, to Distro's shit-eating grin, back to Stars, and then back to Ka'harja.

And then he fainted.

## **Chapter End.**

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