

**Chapter 24:**  
**Mrerf 6<sup>th</sup>, Grada**  
**Year 10,053 AE**  
**(Somewhere Else; Okatako)**

Ka'harja felt like he was going to collapse.

He'd been running for... he wasn't sure how long. But the sky was turning orange in the distance and he could hear night-bugs starting their songs, and knew it had been a while.

Maybe it hadn't been the best idea, sprinting away from camp. But it was much better than having to face Coff and explain his feelings.

Why had Stars told him? Oh Great Star, now he could never go back!

Ka'harja let out a loud sigh as he looked around.

Not that he'd know how to get back. He was in the middle of nowhere, and could barely tell what direction he'd come from.

He wanted to lie down but the grass was damp and muddy, and he was already sweaty enough....

Though there was a large, flat rock nearby. Maybe he could sit on that for a bit?

It was worth checking out.

Ka'harja made his way over to the rock and was relieved to see it was dry. After a quick moment to catch his breath he hoisted himself onto its flat top and had another look around.

There was a gravel road not far off. It didn't look familiar, though. Definitely not the same path Sken's caravan had been following....

'Ugh.'

Whatever.

He'd deal with that later.

For now he was going to sleep.

He would just close his eyes to rest, and deal with life afterwards.

He felt himself dozing, and let himself... drift off....

'AY!'

The voice pulled him from his sleepy haze, and Ka'harja found he barely had the energy to open his eyes.

But why bother? Whoever it was probably wasn't talking to him, anyway....

'Ay! Ka'harja? Ka'harja!'

*That* got his attention, and he sat up and glanced around the dark field.

He saw a single caravan on the road, now, pulled by plain brown horses and steered by a familiar feline woman who's name he couldn't seem to place in his exhausted state. But he recognised the bright orange curls shadowed in the light of the old lantern behind her and, even from a distance, he knew her dark skin was dotted with freckles. He knew her. He knew he knew her....

He wiped the sleep from his eyes.

*Where the hell was he?*

'Ka'harja, that chu?'

He nodded slowly.

'Gods above! Y'alive!' she turned and slammed a hand against the caravan's wall. 'Oi! Lads! Distro's boy's alive!'

Another familiar felinic poked his head out one of the caravan windows.

'Ah, *shit!*' he exclaimed. 'Thought ya'd burnt with ya house! What ya doing on a rock all th'way out 'ere?'

'I got lost,' Ka'harja admitted.

'I'll say!' the woman retorted. 'Y'mum 'right?'

'Yeah, she's fine,' he shrugged.

'We got ya mail!' the second felinic called.

'Our mail?' Ka'harja echoed.... Then, it hit him, and he couldn't believe he'd had trouble recognising them. 'Aunt Denni! Uncle Tayal!'

'Ahah! Y'*do* 'member me!' Denni let out a hearty laugh and motioned for Ka'harja to come closer. 'Thought ya'd forgotten me for a moment there!'

'I think I did. Just for a moment, though,' Ka'harja couldn't hide his smile as he clambered up the side of the cart to join Denni at the reins. 'Is Werani here?'

'Yep, sleepin' in the back like a babe in a cradle!' Denni replied. 'S'prised I didn't wake 'im with m' banging on th'wall!'

'Or y'drivin!' Tayal cackled. 'I swear, y'get worse every day!'

'Oh-hoo! Y'ain't one t'talk, Tayal!' Denni retorted. Then she turned to Ka'harja and shrugged. 'Where's y'mum, hon? Gotta give 'er some stuff.'

'Uh, I'm not actually sure,' Ka'harja admitted. 'I wasn't joking before. I'm... lost.'

'Aw, hon—'

'I know where she *should* be, if they haven't left me behind,' Ka'harja pointed in a random direction. 'By the river.'

'River ain't that way, Sweetheart,' Denni corrected Ka'harja by pushing his fingers until he was pointed in the right direction. 'But nah, y'mum'll be waiting for ya. Sh'ain't th'sort to leave 'er boy b'hind!'

'Yeah,' Tayal scoffed. 'Do'ya 'member when 'e was sleepin' an' we tried t'get Distro t'leave 'im for th'night an' come driving with us?'

'HAH! I 'member 'er biting Dola over it!'

'Dola?' Ka'harja didn't remember that name.

'E was m'old life partner,' Tayal leant out of another window, resting his arms on the driver's seat above Denni and shrugging. 'Y'was only ten when 'e passed. Y'only met 'im... three times? Not s'prised 'e ain't in y'memories, y'forgetful li'l thing!'

'Oh.'

'Y'want a lift t'th'river?' Denni asked.

'That'd be helpful, yeah.'

'Ah, that's m'sis!' Tayal ruffled Denni's hair. Lookin' out fer D's kid like y'still together!'

'You— Wait, you *dated* my mum?' Ka'harja felt like a rug had just been pulled out from under him. 'I thought you were just friends!'

'No? Ah've told y'b'fore 'bout it. But.... Mm,' Denni shrugged. 'Guess y'memory's even worse than I thought.... Y'mum took m'last name, if that's a way t'put it for ya.'

Forget the rug. He'd just been catapulted across the field....

'Though back then sh'was going by Talti,' Denni chuckled. 'Sh'was having a hard time with 'er identity. Sure y'member *that*, at least?'

'Y-Yeah. I think so.'

'Yeah. Sh'changed it t'Saima when we split,' Denni continued. 'An' Distro when sh'moved in here! Really, I think th'reason sh'stopped changing an' figured 'erself out was 'cuz'a you!'

'Sh'always wanted a babe,' Tayal cut in. 'But sh'was too proud t'say so. I 'member us showin' up one day t'find y'wrapped up in bandages like a newborn in a swaddle! Y'was terrified of us then! I 'member you cryin' an' hiding in y'sleepin' bag thinkin' we was gonna *eat* ya!'

'Y'was a stressed little'un, that's f'sure!' Denni laughed.

'I'm braver now,' Ka'harja bragged.

'Hah! Crock!' Denni jabbed him in the side. 'Y'never in y'life got lost without it bein' in a panic! Y'ran away from somethin' and I wanna know what it was!'

'Uh...' Ka'harja felt himself blush. 'It... was a *he*.'

'Ooh, an attractive he?' Tayal asked.

Ka'harja nodded.

'Wh' happened?'

'A friend told him I liked him and... I panicked. Bolted. Kept running. Felt stupid that I ran, then felt like I couldn't go back so I ran some more.'

'HAH!' Denni laughed so hard she nearly fell from her seat. 'Now *that's* th'Ka'harja I know!'

'What 'chu gonna do when y'get back?' Tayal asked. 'E into ya?'

'No,' Ka'harja sighed. 'He had a girlfriend.'

'*Had* a girlfriend?' Denni asked.

'Yeah. He left her.'

'S'what's th'problem?'

'He's straight!'

'Did 'e say that?' Tayal scoffed. 'With words? Or are y'just bein' stupid again?'

'Well, no he didn't *say* it—'

'Then how y'know 'e's straight? If 'e left 'is girl 'e mustn't've liked 'er much!'

'He...' Ka'harja couldn't argue with that. 'Uh....'

'Plus, what's t'say 'e ain't bi?' Denni cackled. 'Just 'cos I fucked'cha ma don't mean I wouldn't have fucked y'da, too! Did y'consider 'e might dip in both bottles?'

Ka'harja was so disgusted he almost missed her point. Almost.

'*Bi*? he managed.

'Yeah.'

'Bisexual?'

'Yeah.'

'Oh, Great Star. Bi.'

'Y'forgot 'bout bi boys, eh?' Tayal slapped Ka'harja in the back of the head. 'Even after y'own uncle is one? Y'stupid little shit fer'brains!'

'I'm not smart,' Ka'harja admitted.

'Understatement of th'eclipse!' Denni laughed. 'Oh, Sweetheart, y'dumb as m'wooden leg!'

'You have a wooden leg?' Ka'harja asked.

'Oh moons,' Denni's face disappeared into her hands. 'I love ya. I do. But y'stupid, hon. Y'real fuckin' dumb.'

'Yeah,' Ka'harja barely heard himself over Tayal's laughter. 'Again, not smart.'

'Ah, I love ya, Sweetheart,' Denni wrapped an arm around Ka'harja and pulled him close. She gave him a kiss on the cheek before turning and smacking her brother. 'Ay, didn't 'e get a package from Distro's da?'

'Ah yeah, old grumpy,' Tayal muttered, retreating back into the caravan. 'Right 'ere!'

Ka'harja stared at the package that had suddenly appeared in his hands for a moment before breaking the heavily-waxed seal and pulling out... socks.

Shimmering silken socks with serpentine dragons running along rose-thorn vine patterning, sewn in the ugliest pastel colours Ka'harja could have possibly imagined.

It was too much.

'Ah.... S'okay if y'wanna cry,' Denni muttered. 'S'nothing t'be 'shamed of.'

'I don't know if there's any tears left in me,' his voice quivered. 'I've cried so much lately....'

A hand met his shoulder, and a tail entwined with his own, and he looked to his uncle and sniffed before sliding off his shoes and slipping the socks on.

'Lookin' good, hon,' Denni commented.

Ka'harja snickered and wiped his nose. 'You can be honest. They're ugly, aren't they?'

'Nah, they're pretty,' Tayal laughed. 'Wolven shit's cute.'

'Speakin' of pretty,' Denni grinned. 'Show 'im th'star!'

'The star?' Ka'harja asked.

'TH'STAR!' Tayal gasped, retreating into the caravan again with several loud crashes before emerging with a large yellow rock.

'It's a r—' Ka'harja cut short. 'Is that... yellow soulstone? *Yellow!*'

'Y'got it!' Tayal exclaimed. 'I ain't never seen soulstone this colour b'fore! T'was in a big crater near y'house! 'Reckon it was one of them two stars that fell!'

'Couldn't find th'other one,' Denni snorted. 'Reckon it landed a bit away, an' got picked up by 'nother traveller.'

'Keepin' an eye out for it though!' Tayal grinned, holding the star out for Ka'harja to take. 'Pretty cool, eh?'

'Yeah...' Ka'harja felt mesmerised by the glowing yellow rock. It was... big. And heavy. And beautiful. 'You know, I saw it land.'

'Aw, lucky!' Tayal laughed. 'Hah! Well, t'was near ya place, so I ain't s'prised y'saw it.'

'Not lucky, it was like being hit by a stampeding herd of dragons,' he explained. 'I

could barely get up, and when I finally did the second one hit and threw me down again. I honestly thought I was going to die or something. And I could barely hear afterwards... Wasn't lucky at all.'

'But was it pretty?' Denni asked.

Ka'harja thought back. 'Yes and no. It looked like...'

'Like what?'

'You know those murals you find in animon churches?' he asked. 'Of Higrunchi leaping into the sky and turning into the sun?'

'Shit.'

'Nah way!'

'Yeah way,' Ka'harja passed the glowing stone back to Tayal. 'I'd just stolen shit from a bunch of religious folk, too, and for a moment I actually thought—' he cut off in a giggle. '—I thought for a moment that their gods were coming to beat me up!'

'Oh, hon, sounds like y'got up t'a lot!' Denni wiped her eye. 'Anythin' else happen t'ya lately?'

'A goblin tried to kiss me.'

'A GOBLIN!' Tayal screeched out a cackle. 'TRIED T'KISS YA! HAH! BOY! Y'GOT ME! Y'GONNA KILL ME!'

'Yeah, I know, it was gross,' Ka'harja mock-gagged. 'She was nice and all, but I didn't want her anywhere near my face.'

Tayal kept laughing. So hard he slipped from the open caravan window and back into the caravan with a crash— And finally, Werani snorted awake and rolled out of bed.

'Ka'harja?' he asked, poking his head out the window and kissing Denni's cheek. 'What's 'e doin' 'ere?'

'Got lost,' Denni explained. 'On our way t'drop 'im off t'is mum.'

'Distro's alive?' Werani's face broke into a grin. 'Gods! S'great news! Thought th'poor thing'd burnt up!'

'Nah, sh'good!' Tayal chimed in. 'Ka'harja got 'nother boyfriend.'

'I didn't—' Ka'harja felt himself blush as the felinics laughed. 'I *wish*.'

'Y'never know,' Werani gave his shoulder a friendly punch and sniffed. 'Might like y'back!'

'Well he knows I like him, so I guess I can only hope....'

'Y'know what'll calm y'nerves?' Tayal asked— And didn't wait for a response before passing Ka'harja a half-empty bottle. 'Alco-holic-ohol!'

'Hah! Sounds like y've had t'much, y'self!' Denni retorted.

Ka'harja wasn't sure he should drink.... After what Coff had said about his mother, and his depression, it seemed like a bad idea....

Though, he hadn't exactly made the best choices today. What was *one more* bad decision?

'Cheers,' he muttered, holding up the bottle before throwing his head back and downing it in one go. 'GODS! What was that?'

'New stuff,' Tayal replied. 'Made by foxens in Quel'tua— Gots th'party of a foxen, an' th'self-control of an avio!'

'Flavour of th'Rendi,' Denni tapped the label with a beautifully painted nail.

'Th' name, ah' mean.'

Ka'harja turned the bottle over and checked it. She was right. *Flavour of the Rendi* was written in cursive that looked as drunk as a bottle of the stuff would probably make you.

'Want s'more?' Werani asked.

'I—'

'Course 'e does!' Tayal interrupted. 'E's Distro's boy!'

Ka'harja couldn't argue with that.

## **Chapter End.**

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