

Chapter 25:
Mrerf 6th, Grada
Year 10,053 AE
(Near the River; Okatako)

A sky of rainbow stars silhouetted the lone caravan as its horses trudged over the uneven field. Each bump sent the boy on top of the cart stumbling from one end to the other; his voice faltering, but his song not stopping, as he lost and found his balance over and over.

Ka'harja wasn't a bad singer —not really— and perhaps if he practised he could become decent, but backed by the screaming felinics below him it was impossible to make out his voice as anything besides a drunken shout.

The group had all but forgotten that they were supposed to be heading for the river. And it was by pure luck alone that the band of idiots happened to be going in the right direction.

'Oh lover!' Ka'harja sung. 'Dear lover!'

'DEAR LOVAH!'

'Dear lover! What are you now! My lover!'

'M'LOVAH!'

'My lover! A beast of green and black!'

'GREEN AN'BLACK!'

'A *beast* of green and black!'

'GREEN AN'BLACK!'

'And the Maiden said—'

'AN'TH'MAIDEN SAID!'

'—*SPARE ME!*' Ka'harja cried, raising his hands above his head and addressing the sky. 'Oh dear lover! Spare me!'

'SPARE ME—'

'SPARE MY LIFE!'

'SPARE ME—'

'OH *DEAR LOVER*—' Ka'harja cut off as he lurched sideways and fell off the caravan. '*FUCK ME!*'

'THOSE AIN'T TH'LYRICS!' an indignant cry called.

'I FELL!' Ka'harja exclaimed. 'STOP THE CARAVAN! I BROKE MY EVERYTHING!'

'Y'fine!' Denni called back, tugging the horses to a stop. 'Get back in y'place on th'roof so we can keep moving!'

'But Auntie!' Ka'harja whined. 'I broke my everything!'

'Y'broke y'nothin'!'

'I did too break my—'

'BY THE MOONS!' a new voice joined the group, and Baku appeared over a hill. 'Ka'harja! Oh, moons! I thought we'd lost you!'

'Hey *party boy!*' Ka'harja called, rolling in a circle and flattening the grass around

him. 'Did you miss me?'

'This y'boyfriend?' Denni cackled. 'What a *twunk!*'

'No, no!' Ka'harja pushed himself to his feet, stumbling a few steps before catching himself. 'This isn't my boyfriend! This is *Baku!* Baku is *Koko's* boyfriend! And Koko's a *bitch!* I wouldn't steal her boyfriend, she'd *beat me up!*'

'Ah. You're drunk,' Baku sighed, wiping the sweat from his brow and pushing back his messy hair. 'At least you found people.'

'Not *people!*' Ka'harja snapped. '*Family!*'

'FAMILY!' the felinics all cried.

'FAMILY!' Ka'harja repeated, collapsing at Baku's feet and staring, intensely, into the man's eyes as tears came to his own. 'They're my... my family, Baku.'

'They're felinic,' Baku retorted.

'She fucked my mum!' Ka'harja exclaimed. 'I didn't know that! I thought she was my aunt! But she *fucked* my *mum*, Baku!'

'*Oooh-kay,*' Baku let out a heavy breath and looked around. 'You sound like you need to lie down.'

'I need— I need to—' he threw up instead of finishing his sentence.

'SKEN!' Baku shouted over the felinics' laughter. 'SKEN! I FOUND KA'HARJA!'

'Wait, *Sken?*' Werani's laughter quieted down and he wiped his nose on his wrist. 'Lyzik?'

Baku twitched an ear. 'Yeah?'

'Hah! By th'moons, Ka! Y'met little Lyzik?!' Tayal exclaimed. 'OI! OI SKEN! S'US! YOU KNOW SKEN?' Ka'harja exclaimed.

'Yeah!' Denni cackled. 'W'used to run in th'same circles! Sh'was a little brat last w'saw her!'

'Been years!' exclaimed Werani. 'Sh'was what? Pushin' fifteen when w'knew'er?'

'Yeah, yeah, sh'was hanging with th'Sapious caravan!' Tayal chuckled. 'Weren't that guy Raoul lookin' after'er for'er mum?'

'Raoul!' Ka'harja exclaimed. 'Oh, she does *not* like him!'

'Why, wha'did'e do?' Denni snorted. Then she fell silent as her eyes met something ahead and her smile fell from her face. 'Aw, no. Hon. *No.*'

Ka'harja turned and saw Sken coming up the hill, her tail twitching as she locked eyes with the felinics.

A hush fell over the boisterous group as she made her way down the incline and pulled Ka'harja to his feet, and the man felt the awkward silence stretching over the grassy fields like a heavy blanket.

'Sken?' he said slowly.

'*What?*' her voice was barely a whisper as she refused to look away from the distant horizon.

'This is my aunt, Denni,' he motioned to the cart. 'And my uncles. Tayal and Werani.'

Sken eyed him for a second before turning away again. 'I know their names.'

'Lyzik, love?' Denni's voice floated down from the caravan, as sweet as the time Ka'harja had come home with skinned knees and teary eyes. 'What happened t'ya?'

Sken scoffed. 'Remember Raoul?'

'Yeah?'

'I was dating him.'

'Aw, *no*. Hon! 'E was t'old for ya,' Denni sighed. 'Aw, love....'

'I know that *now*,' Sken muttered.

'We would'a helped'cha if—'

'I know. Obviously. That's why he told me not to tell you we were together.'

'Hon—'

'I have a wife now,' Sken's tone shifted, and a smile found its way to her lips. It was weak, but it was genuine, and she stood a little straighter as she continued. 'And I'm over Raoul. And I am also *not* surprised the first time I see you ratty little scammers in — What is it? *Ten years*? Is because you've picked up this good-for-nothing dumb-shit.'

Ka'harja looked to the ground and coughed as Sken slapped him on the back.

'I'm glad you're safe, you moron,' Sken sighed. She flicked her tail before looking up at the felinics. 'You're Ka'harja's aunt? Really? I'm guessing Distro is on that ex-wife's side of the family, then?'

Denni let out a laugh. 'Ah, right! Right. Y'never actually met Saima, did ya? Sh'left our group right b'fore we met, didn't she?'

Sken gave shrug. Then a nod. Then another shrug.

'Saima is Distro,' Denni explained. 'Sh'changed her name.'

'You're fucking joking!' Sken snapped. 'Oh, *fuck* you! Fuck all of you!'

The felinics let out a chorus of cackles as Sken stomped a foot.

'You're telling me Distro is your fucking ex-wife?!' Sken's gills let out a frustrated squeal. 'You're telling me— You're telling me that I've been dragging around one of you garbage-eating sticky-fingered scammers for a whole *month*?!'

'Yeah!' Denni beamed. 'Ah shit, though. Can't believe y'met up on y'own like this! Small world, huh? We were hopin' t'see her, actually. If y'wouldn't mind it.'

'Of course you were,' Sken gave an exaggerated shrug. 'Well, if you're here you might as well stay the night. We have a fire-pit already set up and your horses look like they could use a good brush. Our caretaker would probably love to see them.'

'Well, I ain't gonna argue w'my horses being spoiled!' Denni cackled. 'Joinin' y'would be an honour, hon! An' I'll keep m'hands in m'pockets this time, huh? Nothing'll go missing. Promise!'

'At least nothin' important,' Tayal joked.

Sken just rolled her eyes.

'I'll go let Krarf know about the horses,' Baku mumbled, hurrying away.

'Who's Krarf?' Ka'harja sniffed.

'You know Krarf,' Sken sighed.

'Krarf.... That name is very familiar.'

'By the Goddess, Ka'harja,' Sken put her face in her hands. 'The animal caretaker, Krarf? Short? Bearded? Quiet?'

'He feeds the dragons!' the memory of Krarf shot back to Ka'harja and he nearly fell over again. 'I think.... I think he doesn't like me very much.'

'No, he does *not*,' Sken confirmed, shoving Ka'harja in the direction of camp. 'To be fair, though, he doesn't like many people. But he does his job.... Now, get moving. Everyone is worried sick about you.'

'Sick...' Ka'harja muttered. 'If they're sick they should see a doctor. Coff is a doctor. Coff.... Coff.... OH, COFF!'

He turned to sprint away, but met Sken's outstretched arm instead and crumpled to the ground.

'We're not wasting any more time chasing you down,' she muttered, gripping him by the shirt and yanking him to his feet. 'You're going to face Coff like a man and deal with this shit.'

'But— But foxen men are *cowards!*' Ka'harja exclaimed, trying to wiggle out of his shirt but wincing as his ear was given a warning tug. 'We're known for it!'

'Not in my caravan, you're not,' Sken scolded. 'Besides, your mother's been worried. You don't want to make your mother worried, do you?'

'No,' Ka'harja admitted, letting himself be defeated. 'I love my mother.'

'I love y'mother too,' Denni mumbled from somewhere behind the pair.

'We're just over the hill,' Sken's voice softened, and she let Ka'harja's shirt go— Though her arm remained firmly around his shoulders. 'Come on, you dumb arse.'

Ka'harja pouted as he was led back to camp. Almost everyone had gathered to greet him, obviously alerted by Baku.... He felt guilty when he saw his mother pacing anxiously with Dena at her side, and gave a half-wave as she paused to look at him.

'You little shit!' she exclaimed, marching over to throw her arms around him and bury her face into his hip. 'I can't believe you! I thought I'd lost you! Don't you *ever* run away like that again!'

'Sorry,' Ka'harja managed. He shuffled in place for a moment before giving a cough and motioning behind himself. 'I found Aunt Denni.'

'You wha— DENNI!' Distro gasped, her face lighting up in a wide, draconic grin.

'WHOA! DISTRO! Y'GOT UGLY!' Tayal's laugh was immediately followed by shouting as Denni yanked him out of the caravan and threw him to the ground.

'Y'beautiful,' Denni corrected. 'Y'look cute w'orns!'

'They're more like stubs,' Distro snorted, poking one of the four little white bumps on her head. 'But yeah, you could say they're *growing* on me!'

'Ah'm gonna fuckin' kill ya,' Denni replied. 'Ay! I got ya mail!'

'Oh!' Distro clapped her hands together and rushed past her son so she could clamber to her ex's side. 'From my father?'

'Yeah! From y'da!' Werani stuck his head out of the caravan and handed Distro a handful of letters. 'Think 'e still hates us. But's nothin' new there.'

'Nah, he loves you,' Distro cooed, pinching the felinic's cheek and sticking out her tongue. 'He's just too *cultured* to know it.'

The felinics laughed, and Ka'harja heard a sigh from his side.

Dena looked lonely and uncomfortable as Distro chatted with her old friends, and Ka'harja couldn't help feeling bad for her. He wondered if he should introduce them— But was beaten to it as his mother practically leapt from her seat and grabbed Dena by the arm.

'This is Dena!' she exclaimed. 'We need to make her a Caves and Creatures character, *right now*.'

'YES!' Tayal shouted, yanking open the caravan's door and ushering the two women inside. 'W'GOT OUR THIEF BACK! W'CAN GO T'STORM MOUNTAIN AND BEAT TH'OGRE!'

'Gods they're loud,' Sken muttered. Then she turned to Ka'harja with a grin. 'I can see where you get it from.'

Ka'harja gave a nervous shrug. 'Well, I mean.... Yeah.'

'Coff's waiting for you,' said Sken, motioning to the healer's caravan. 'You should talk to him.'

'Do I have to?'

'Yes,' Sken replied. 'For his sake. Please, just talk to him before he stresses himself to death.'

Ka'harja let out a loud groan and trudged past the rest of the caravaners to Coff's door. He stood for a second before glancing back to Sken, who gave a firm nod. When she did he sighed and knocked on the door.

He heard a crash and a panicked exclamation in response and almost bolted again. But he swallowed his anxiety as the door slowly opened.

'Ka'harja?'

'Yeah,' Ka'harja cleared his throat as he avoided the healer's eye. 'We should probably... talk.'

Coff simply stood aside and motioned for Ka'harja to join him in the caravan.

Reluctantly, Ka'harja did, and sat on his mother's bed as Coff sat in his chair at his desk. He stared at Ka'harja, who slowly gave a nod.

'So....'

'S-So,' Coff echoed. 'Ka'harja, I-I....'

Ka'harja waited patiently for Coff to finish, but when the man didn't, he simply sighed and looked to the floor. 'I know you like Stars.'

'Wh-What? Why would I... W-We h-have nothing in-in c-common!' Coff gasped. 'I don't— I d-don't l-like her!'

'Wait, you *don't* like Stars?' Ka'harja asked. 'Then who's the crush you were talking about?'

Coff stared at him for a long, long moment. The look on his face told Ka'harja that he *should* have known, but in the state he was in he... couldn't quite figure it out.

After a minute that felt like an hour, he decided to guess. 'You like... *Sken*?'

'*NO!*' Coff exclaimed, burying his face in his hands. 'Y-Y-You're so— So st-st-stup-stup-stupid— H— How— How are you— Even— Even—'

Ka'harja wasn't sure what to do as Coff doubled over with a frustrated cry, so he awkwardly leant over and pet the healer on the back. 'I'm sorry. Does it really matter that I know? I mean— I'd probably end up telling them by accident....'

Coff took a deep breath and sat up straight. He stared at Ka'harja again, his eyes wide. And, after a minute, he spoke.

Slowly.

'Ka'harja?'

'Yeah?'

'I like... *you*.'

'As a friend?'

The healer struck him across the cheek so hard he slipped off the bed and onto the floor. His head was spinning as he scrambled to sit back up.

What— What other kind of like was there besides—

'Oh Great Star you *like* like me!' Ka'harja exclaimed.

Coff closed his eyes and let out a long breath, as if a weight had been lifted off him. He nodded as he took another deep breath in. 'Yes.'

'You *like* like me,' Ka'harja repeated.

'Yes.'

'Like, *like* like me?'

'Yes.'

'Like— You— You like, *like* like me.'

Coff buried his face in his hands. 'G-Goddess knows *why*.'

Ka'harja couldn't comprehend it.

Coff liked him?

Coff... *like liked* him.

'D-Do you l-like me back?' Coff asked. 'Or was St-Stars....'

Ka'harja wasn't sure what to say. But he knew he should say something— But what? What should he say?

'Uh.... I'm going to give you a foot rub!' Ka'harja decided, leaping to his feet and lifting Coff into the air.

'Wh-What!' Coff exclaimed as he was dropped onto his bed.

'We're boyfriends now,' Ka'harja managed. 'So I'm going to give you a foot rub.'

'Um...' Coff's eyes darted around the room. 'A-Are you... d-drunk?'

'I'm not drunk, I'm your boyfriend!' Ka'harja replied, flopping heavily next to Coff and pulling his feet onto his lap. 'And I want to be a good boyfriend so I'm going to— Great Star, it's *gone!*'

'Wh-What's g-gone?'

'Your foot! Your foot is gone!' Ka'harja stared down at Coff's footless ankle with wide eyes. 'Where'd it go?!

'I-I was— I was b-born l-like th-this. You— You d-didn't no-noti...' Coff trailed off with a sigh. 'Of-Of *c-course* you d-didn't n-notice....'

Ka'harja felt tears coming to his eyes. 'But... but how can I.... How can I give you a feet rub if you don't have *feet*?'

'Pl-Please don't c-cry,' Coff muttered, shifting around awkwardly until he was sitting with his head on Ka'harja's shoulder and his arm around his back. He lifted his other leg and showed off his bare foot. 'I st-still h-have o-one f-foot. J-Just do— Just do th-that one tw-twice? And— And d-don't st-start crying. Pl-please don't....'

It was too late. Tears streamed down Ka'harja's cheeks as he wrapped his arms around the healer and squeezed him tightly. 'I'm so sorry I didn't notice! I'm a bad boyfriend!'

'N-No?'

'I am!'

'Y-You're not— W-We're not? A-Are we?'

'I love you,' Ka'harja sobbed. 'I love you and I'm sorry.'

'You— Um... ' Coff looked around the room anxiously, his eyes settling on the door with a desperate look in them. 'Sh-Should we— Distro? Y-Your mother. Do you w-want me to g-get h-her or....'

'I want to sleep,' Ka'harja sniffed.

'O-Okay,' Coff nodded. 'G-Good idea. Sl-Sleep. And we— We will talk abou-about this wh-when you're s-sober.'

Chapter End.

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