

Chapter 26:
Mrerf 7th, Yieda
Year 10,053 AE
(Coff's Caravan; Okatako)

Eighth child of the Ninth, he was hung over.

Ka'harja took a deep breath and tried to open his eyes. Everything was *far* too bright for his liking and he struggled to focus his vision.

What had he done last night? He couldn't remember a thing.

The taste of an unfamiliar alcohol hung on his breath and he groaned. Had his mother had his aunt over?

No. No. This wasn't his house.... This was Coff's caravan.

He groaned again.

He had to get up.

Gods, he didn't want to. But he had to. He was starving, and he couldn't see his mother anywhere. She still wasn't supposed to be out of bed for too long, and she was probably running around camp, kicking more logs and wearing herself out.

He took a deep breath and smelt breakfast cooking on the air. It smelt *so good*.

Great Star, he felt like he hadn't eaten in days! Had he missed dinner?

It felt like he'd missed dinner.

And breakfast was out there, waiting for him....

That was enough to motivate him into ignoring his pounding headache. He pushed himself to his feet and stumbled into the caravan door, where he stayed for a moment before finally opening it and, legs trembling, made his way through camp to the fire pit.

He swore everyone was staring at him as they sat with their meals. He must have looked as hung over as he felt as he stood, swaying, in front of Coborn.

He wasn't sure why she was snickering.

Nor was he sure why Coff was looking at him the way he was from her side.

'Hi,' Ka'harja managed, his voice as raspy as his mother's used to be.

'H-Hi,' Coff responded. 'Abou-About l-last night....'

Last night? Ka'harja could feel himself squinting as he tried to remember what happened last night.

Oh!

'Oh— What Stars said!' Ka'harja blurted. 'Uh— She was— She was wrong. Mistaken. I think she misheard me or something.'

Coff just stared as Coborn's snicker turned into a cackle and she spilt the bowl of half-served oats on the ground.

'Or is that not what you're talking about?'

'N.... No,' Coff muttered. 'I— I mean.... A-After th-that.'

After that?

'What happened after that?'

'Y-You don't remem-remember?'

'Uh...' was he supposed to? Had something important happened or— He let out a

shriek and leapt backwards, tripping over his own feet and ending up on the ground as the entire night came flooding back to him. 'YOU LIKE ME BACK!'

'*There we go,*' Coborn swallowed her laugh as Coff shook his head.

'You- You r-really forg-forgot?'

'Apparently?'

'G-Goddess,' Coff put his face in his hands and let out a long, deep sigh.

'Are we dating now?' Ka'harja blurted.

Coff didn't look up, and instead let out another sigh.

'So, uh.... Is that a no?'

'N-Not a n-no,' Coff managed, running his hands through his short, messy hair and sitting up straight, finally looking over to Ka'harja. 'But— Not a y-yes. N-Not y-yet.'

'Why not yet?' cocking his head, Ka'harja tried to piece together what the problem was. If they liked each other, why not be together?

'Because you're as dumb as a brick,' Felelor's hand made contact with Ka'harja's back, and Ka'harja almost shrieked again in surprise. 'And you wouldn't know a boundary if you ran face-first into a sign that said "no entry."'

'Right,' Ka'harja glanced to Coff, who gave a slow nod. 'I'm too dumb for you.'

'N-No!' Coff shook his head. 'I-It's ch-char-charming. You are. M-Most of the t-time. B-But.... I.... We.... Need to t-talk about it.'

'Privately,' Coborn added.

Ka'harja nodded, and got to his feet. 'Okay.... Now?'

'E-Eat first,' Coff took the bowl of food from Coborn and offered it to Ka'harja— It was devoured in moments. 'I.... That was f-fast.'

'I was hungry,' Ka'harja said dumbly. 'And... if you want to talk....'

'Uh...' Coff rubbed the back of his neck. 'M-Maybe a-after....'

'After what?'

Coff glanced to the out-of-place caravan at the edge of camp and sighed. 'Distro.'

'Shit, right,' Felelor put a hand to his mouth, his grin disappearing into a solemn look. 'Yeah. You might want to go talk to her.'

Ka'harja didn't even think to ask why as he leapt to his feet and ran to Denni's caravan. The way Felelor had looked at him, he knew something was wrong. He burst into the caravan, ignoring Tayal's terrified shout, and glanced around for his mother.

She stared at him from her place in Dena's arms; her eyes red and sore but her expression otherwise calm as she wiped her nose.

'Dramatic,' she snorted, the sides of her snout twitching as if she was trying to smile.

'Are you okay?' Ka'harja blurted. 'Have you been crying? Why— What happened?!'

Distro gave a loud sniff and sat up. She pet the bed beside her, and when Ka'harja sat down she put her head on his arm and sighed, 'My mother's sick. L... Laseen. Dad's wife.'

'Grandma?' Ka'harja managed. 'What's she sick with? I-Is it bad?'

'She was drugged,' Distro muttered. 'With chino flore.'

'The pain poison?' Ka'harja let out a gasp. 'What— Is she okay?'

'She'll live,' Distro sighed, fiddling with the wrinkled letter in her hands and picking at the already-frayed corner with worry. 'But she's not well.... She.... She was in so much pain that she....'

Werani's hand met Ka'harja's shoulder. 'Sh'ripped out 'er own stomach.'

'Great Star,' Ka'harja felt like he was shrinking —like hands of horrible feelings were crushing him like a ball of paper— and it took too much effort just to swallow. 'When?'

'Only a couple of days after we lost our house,' Distro took a deep breath and composed herself. 'And that's not the only bad news— My brother was almost hit by a speeding cart, and your cousin fell off a balcony. Nobody's died but... I guess it's just been a string of bad luck for the family.'

'Y'all still 'live though,' Denni sighed. 'Ain't much comfort, but y'all are still 'live.'

Distro nodded, and let out the rest of her breath in a long sigh. 'Did you talk to Coff?'

'I don't think that's important right now—'

'Nonsense,' interrupting her son, Distro waved a hand. 'I want to hear something *good* for once.'

'Well... he says he likes me. But that he wants to talk about it,' Ka'harja sighed. 'Privately. Later.'

'Ah,' Tayal eased out of his chair so he could join Werani in patting Ka'harja's back. 'Better then a no. Prob'ly just wants t'tell y'somethin' 'portant. Like 'e don't like being t'cuddly or somethin'.'

'Hah, yeah,' Ka'harja brushed the felinic's hand off his back and turned so he could lean against the wall. 'You guys have fun with your game last night?'

'Yeah, Dena's a surprisingly good ranger,' Distro gave a grunt and flopped against the nurlak, who scoffed but didn't push her away. 'Finally managed to get past that damn ogre and beat the campaign. It's only taken *three years* to kill that damn thing!'

'To be fair, that's only six sessions.'

'*To be fair*, they're *eight hour* sessions!' Distro retorted, kicking out her foot into her son's face. 'You should play with us.'

'You know I can't focus that long,' he replied. 'Maybe if you did... I don't know, ten minute sessions, I'd be able to get through them.'

'Ten minute sessions? What, you want to meet *one* person and then stop playing?'

'I mean, yeah. I hate meeting people. Even fake people.'

'Well, I think—'

'C'mon, Distro, y'ain't much better!' Tayal interrupted, earning a laugh from his sister.

'Yeah, yeah!' Denni cackled. 'I 'member when y'used t'hide in th'back of th'cart whenever there was a knock on th'door!'

'What do you mean "used to?"' Distro snorted. 'You think I ever started answering my door? I moved to Okatako for a fucking reason, didn't I! Honestly, sometimes it feels like I have the social skills of a slug.'

'Ooh, self-burn,' Werani teased. Then he nudged Ka'harja. 'Y'really gonna let someone talk 'bout y'mum like that, boy?'

'Yeah!' Tayal chimed. 'If someone said that 'bout m'own mother I'd give 'em a good deckin'!

'I mean, she said it about herself—'

'No 'scuses! D'fend y'mum!' Denni exclaimed, poking Ka'harja in the shoulder. 'Give th'mean old lady a good slap!

'Old!' Distro scoffed. 'I'm not old!

'And I'm not slapping her!' said Ka'harja.

'Aw, what? You're too much of a sook?' Distro grinned. 'I knew it. I raised a wimp.'

'What, you *want* me to hit you?' Ka'harja looked from his mother to the cheering felinics. 'I'm not— Why— What's wrong with you all?!

'Ah, I knew it, e's a wimp!

'WIMP!

'Big baby.'

'Hey— No, no!' Ka'harja leapt to his feet and raised his hands defensively. 'You guys can't just bully me like this!

'Crock!' Distro gave a wicked grin and made to stand up. 'We can *absolutely* bully you!

'*NO!*' Ka'harja didn't mean for it to come out as a shriek, but the entire room had taken cue from his mother and suddenly advanced on him— And he was only half out the door before he felt his mother leap onto his back and whoop like she was taming a wild horse. He nearly slipped down the last step as her weight slammed into him and stumbled along the damp grass for a minute before Distro's arms wrapped around his face and he couldn't see where he was going.

'Git 'im, Distro!

'No! Stop getting me!' Ka'harja exclaimed. Then he tripped and fell, the weight on his back pulling him down sideways.

'Aw, FUCK!' Distro exclaimed as Ka'harja landed on her. 'Elbow— ELBOW!'

Ka'harja rolled off her and she let out a gasp, gripping her stomach and rolling over to catch her breath.

'Y'kay, Distro?' Denni called.

'Yeah, fine,' Distro replied.

'Serves you right,' Ka'harja joked, rolling to his feet and offering his mother a hand. 'I'm a *sensitive* boy, you know!'

Right as he said it he met eyes with Coff, and felt like an idiot. But then Coff smiled and he felt a little less like an idiot.... And then his mother yanked him onto the ground again and started sticking her fingers in his ears, and the shriek he let out made him feel stupider than ever.

'Let me go!' he cried. 'I'm fragile! I'M FRAGILE!'

'Crock!' Distro retorted before making a throaty snort— And Ka'harja screamed as spit made its way down the back of his neck.

'*DISGUSTING!*' his voice rose so high it hurt his ears. '*YOU'RE DISGUSTING!*'

'You're the one with spit on you.'

'Get off me!' wiggling as much as he could, Ka'harja managed to knock his mother off his back and fled through the caravans towards the river.

He couldn't hear anyone following him as he made it to the incline and dared to slow down. Then he glanced back and was relieved to see nobody behind him.

'Oh, thank the Eighth child of the Ninth,' he breathed, starting down the hill. Then he slipped and tumbled the whole way down before splashing into the water with another loud cry.

He flailed for a moment before something heavy knocked the wind out of him. In the second it took him to compose himself, something grabbed him and flipped him upright, pushing him up and out of the river again.

'Scara, Ka'harja, are you *trying* to drown yourself!' Sken's voice snapped. 'Stop struggling!'

'Sk— Sken?' Ka'harja managed as he was hefted out of the water and dropped heavily on the muddy bank by— By an almost completely naked Sken! 'I— I'm gay!'

'Yes, I know that,' Sken grunted, dropping on the bank next to Ka'harja and rubbing her cheek. 'You also have a real good kick in you.'

'I kicked you?' cogs turning in his head, it took Ka'harja a moment to realise exactly what had just happened. 'Oh, oh Great Star I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to—'

'Yeah, yeah, I know,' Sken cut Ka'harja off with a humoured snort. 'You *never* mean to freak out. What happened this time?'

'Mum spat on me,' Ka'harja explained, making the mistake of glancing over himself and the secas. 'Uh. Your underwear.'

'What about my underwear?'

'I can see it?'

'Well, yeah,' Sken snorted. 'Can't exactly swim properly in jeans.'

'Ah. I see,' he gave a short nod. 'They're, uh, pink?'

'Yes.'

'I didn't think you'd like pink much,' Ka'harja admitted. 'I thought you'd be more of a... a purple girl.'

'Ugh, purple,' Sken rolled her eyes. 'My school uniform was purple. It was a horrible, ugly shade of the colour, too.'

'You went to school?'

'Had to get smarter than you somehow, didn't I?' Sken grinned before leaning back and letting out a long, heavy sigh. 'I used to hate pink. It's what I was assigned at birth, you know.'

'You were assigned a colour?'

'Yeah, all secas are. Makes up for not being given a gender, I guess,' Sken's gills gave a pop and she grinned widely. 'Though, a secas' colour is meant to be a private thing and we're only meant to tell people we're close to. I never really bought into that whole shtick. Not really.... *Anyway*, you all done drowning?'

'Pretty sure I'm done,' Ka'harja felt himself chuckling as Sken punched him in the shoulder and pushed herself up. He watched as she disappeared back into the river and... wasn't entirely sure what to do next. He didn't want to go back to his mother. Not if she was going to spit on him again. And he wasn't sure Coff was ready to talk to him yet.

Though it was all he wanted to do.

But Coff had seemed determined to have a bit more time before talking about it.

And after Felelor's comment about "boundaries" it was probably best not to push.

He lay back in the grass, letting himself sun a little in hopes of drying off, and sighed loudly.

What was he doing wrong?

It always seemed to be *him*. Was he really that bad a person to know?

Gods, why was he like this?

Why why *why* couldn't he just be a *normal person* and not act like an idiot *constantly*?

'Ka'harja?'

He didn't mean to scream, but he leapt forward and let out a cry so loud that Sken resurfaced just as he went under.

'Scara's sake,' she huffed, lifting him back onto land. 'I thought you said you were *done* with drowning! Look at— You scared Coff!'

Ka'harja flinched as Sken smacked him over the head, then turned to see the healer collapsed on the bank.

'Is he— Coff? Are you okay!' Ka'harja scrambled over to the unconscious man and lifted his head just as his eyes began to flutter back open. 'I'm so sorry!'

Coff just groaned and furrowed his brow.

'Coff, you alright?' Sken asked as she crouched next to the boys. She put a hand on his forehead and gently pet his hair back. 'You need help getting back to your caravan?'

'I— No,' he managed to sit up, with a little help. 'I j-just.... Wanted... to talk.'

'To Ka'harja?'

'Y-Y-Y—' he cut off, and nodded instead.

'Ah,' Sken glanced awkwardly between the boys. 'Did you two figure yourselves out yet, or should I leave?'

'Priv— I— Privately,' Coff managed.

'Okay,' Sken pet him again, almost as awkwardly as when Ka'harja had pet Annanyn the day before, then turned and slid back into the river. 'If you need me... just throw Ka'harja back in.'

'Hey!' he wasn't sure Sken heard his complaint as she disappeared back under the water. A quiet moment passed as the ripples slowly faded, before he felt Coff put a hand on his. 'Coff? You okay?'

'I— I'm o-o-okay,' Coff managed. 'I w-want t-to.... To talk.'

'About... us?'

'Y-Yeah,' a deep blush spread over Coff's cheeks and he looked away. 'I... I like you.'

'As a friend?' Ka'harja joked. He nudged Coff when he rolled his eyes, and finally got a smile out of the man. 'So.'

'S-So....'

'Is it something I did?' Ka'harja blurted. 'I mean— Why you don't want to date me.'

'N-No! I w-w-w-want t-to d-date you,' Coff managed, finally meeting Ka'harja's gaze. 'It's— It's j-just h-hard. And— And i-it's not— It's n-not y-you.'

'That's not something I hear often,' Ka'harja was the one who looked away this time. 'Usually it's me.'

‘No,’ Coff said, his tone surprisingly firm. ‘You. You are— You’re w-wonderful. It’s — It’s T-Tisimi.’

‘Who?’

‘My e-ex g-g-girlf-friend,’ Coff clarified. He shook his head and swallowed before pulling his knees against his chest and speaking quietly, ‘*I’m j-just. So— So s-scared.*’

Ka’harja understood what that felt like.

He really, truly understood.

How could he tell that to Coff, though? About all those years that he’d spent terrified of Kay’oten coming to find him.... It didn’t seem comparable. But then, even after seeing her again and knowing that she was gone for good— The fear still hadn’t gone away. Not really. And it was the same sort of fear, wasn’t it?

Deep breath, Ka’harja thought. He just needed to put it into words. It was simple. *I understand.*

That was all he needed to say. Two words.

I understand.

Okay....

‘Yeah, that sounds like absolute shit. I hope she falls out a window or something.’

He wanted to kill himself.

At least Coff seemed to think it was funny. He laughed for a moment, choking a little on his own giggles as he managed to add, ‘M-Me t-too!’

‘I didn’t mean to say that,’ Ka’harja admitted. ‘Words are just. Hard. I meant to say.... I’m scared too.’

‘Y-You a-are?’ Coff’s smile shrunk, and he edged closer. ‘Of— Of what?’

‘My mother,’ a sigh escaped him, but he was relieved to feel Coff’s head rest against his shoulder. ‘Not Distro. Kay’oten. I know she’s dead and can never come back or hurt me again but— But I’m still terrified of her. Just the idea of her makes me feel sick.’

‘I-I under-understand,’ Coff comforted.

‘Yeah,’ Ka’harja could feel the blood pumping in his ears as Coff’s hand rested on his knee. ‘I... hate knowing that you’re scared. And I want to make you feel safe. Like my mum made me feel safe— Only— Only not like that. Like, different to that. I don’t want to be your dad.’

Coff could hardly speak through his snickers as he sniffed and shook his head. ‘I-I-I knew wh-what y-y-you m-meant! D-Don’t m-make it-it weird!’

‘No— I’m trying to make it the *opposite* of weird!’ Ka’harja defended. ‘Like, I don’t want you calling me “daddy” or anything— Hey no, c’mon! Don’t laugh at that! Coff— Coff!’

The healer couldn’t seem to stop. He laughed, and laughed, and then tears fell down his cheeks and he didn’t bother to wipe them away as he tried to catch his breath, only to glance up at Ka’harja and then laugh even more.

‘Come on, Coff!’ Ka’harja whined, trying to bite away his grin. ‘You’re the one who wanted to talk boundaries!’

Coff nodded and took a deep breath, finally managing to calm himself down. ‘Y-Yes. I— I was. Sorry. It’s j-just— Y-You dig h-holes. Sometimes— Sometimes you sh-should ju-just s-stop talking inst-instead of— Of—’

‘Rambling?’ Ka’harja felt himself grin. ‘Yeah, no. I know. I can’t really help it. I get nervous and it just comes out.’

Coff bit his lip, his cheeks a darkening red as he held back another laughing fit.

‘What?’

‘*Of the closet,*’ it sounded more like a squeak than actual words. And it took a moment to sink in.... But when it did, Ka’harja almost launched himself into the river again.

He wasn’t sure why it was funny. It barely made sense. But it made him giggle. ‘This is not how I thought this conversation was going to go,’ he admitted. ‘I thought it was going to be a *lot* more serious!’

‘I m-meant it t-to b-be,’ Coff replied. ‘I d-don’t know wh-what happened. I just— I just feel b-better when you’re around.’

‘That’s nice to hear,’ he knew he was blushing as Coff moved closer, pressing into his side and squeezing his hand. ‘You make me feel better, too. Like I’m not just an annoying burden with no friends.’

‘You’re— You’re not a-a bur-burden,’ Coff’s hand squeezed tighter, and Ka’harja squeezed back. ‘And.... You.... You h-have fr-friends.’

‘You think?’

‘Y-Yeah,’ Coff looked up at Ka’harja, and offered him a nervous —but very genuine — smile. ‘Y-You have m-m-me. A-And Stars. An-And Baku. C-Coborn r-really li-likes you, t-too.’

‘Really? I got the feeling she found me frustrating.’

‘Sh-She does.’

‘Ah,’ a half-laugh escaped Ka’harja as he dared to grin back. ‘I see.... What’re your thoughts on Koko? You think she likes me?’

Coff bit his lip and looked away, raising a brow. ‘*Mmm....* I-I don-don’t know. I can — I can never tell w-with h-her. She— She likes you mor-more than she l-likes Co-Coborn, at l-least.’

‘Ah, yeah, I didn’t think those two got along much,’ Ka’harja replied. ‘Did something happen between them?’

Coff shook his head. ‘N-No. They just— They just— Just—’

‘Just don’t?’ Ka’harja offered.

Coff nodded. ‘Y-Yea—’

‘HAH!’ Distro’s laugh cut in from above, and the boys turned to see her, Denni, and Dena staring down at them from the top of the hill. ‘*GAAAAY!*’

‘THAT’S THE POINT!’ Ka’harja shouted back as his mother began her way down towards him. ‘Aw, no, what does she want— THIS IS A PRIVATE CONVERSATION! GO AWAY!’

‘YOU SKIPPED BREAKFAST!’ Distro stated incorrectly as she pointed to Denni, who brandished a loaf of bread high above her head. ‘BUT IF YOU’RE GOING TO BE UNGRATEFUL, THEN FINE! DENNI?’

The loaf of bread sailed in a perfect arc through the air and Ka’harja didn’t have time to realise what was happening before it hit him full in the face.

‘*Ow!*’ Ka’harja exclaimed, dramatically motioning from his face to the bread.

‘Seriously? *SERIOUSLY?!*’

‘LOVE YOU!’ his mother called back. Then she headed back up the hill and put an arm around each of her friends (well... one arm went around Dena, while the other linked with Denni’s tail) as they headed back towards camp.

‘Gods! I swear! Sometimes she’s just— UGH!’ Ka’harja flopped onto his back and gave a groan. ‘Sorry about her.’

‘N-No, i-it’s alright,’ Coff picked up the bread from the ground and brushed it off. ‘I-It was n-nice of h-her to— To—’

Ka’harja sighed again. Yeah, he *supposed* it was nice of her. But she didn’t have to interrupt!

‘Y-You sh-should eat,’ Coff held out the bread. ‘Y-You only had o-one bowl at break-breakfast. A-And you— You sk-skipped d-dinner last n-night, t-too.’

‘Yeah, I *guess* I’m still kinda hungry,’ he pushed himself up and took the bread from Coff. ‘Want some?’

‘N-No, I should— I should go, a-actually. I-I ha-have to— I have to organise m-my desk.’

‘Oh— Uh, okay,’ Ka’harja bit his lip and looked away. He didn’t feel like the conversation was over. He felt like there was a lot more that needed to be said... that he needed to ask. But he had no idea what it was, or how he could even *begin* to talk about any of it. He just knew he wasn’t sure about anything....

‘K-Ka’harja?’

He looked up to Coff, who carefully leant forward until their lips touched. It was short. Only a second, at most, before Coff pulled back and got up to walk away. He didn’t say goodbye. Neither of them did. But that was alright. They didn’t need to say anything else.

That had been enough to answer all of his questions.

Chapter End.

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