

Chapter 27:
Mrerf 7th, Yieda
Year 10,053 AE
(Sitting against a tree; Okatako)

Ka'harja hadn't been able to get the kiss off his mind all day. He'd lay down on the riverbank and just stared at the sky until Sken had kicked him and told him to come for lunch.

Lunch.

When it felt like he'd only just had breakfast?

He'd spent the whole day thinking. And about nothing he could really explain, either. Just thinking about Coff, as Coff, with no particular thought about him.

Coff.

Coff....

Coff was wonderful.

'Hey, mate, I asked you a question,' Trat's elbow met the side of Ka'harja's head, and he laughed as Ka'harja flinched. 'Scara, you're just gone, aren't you? Observant as mud.'

'Be nice, Trat,' Lif snickered from his place in the branches above. 'Don't compare him to mud! What did mud ever do to you?'

Ka'harja felt himself blush as the men laughed. But he also felt a grin work its way to his face as he rolled his eyes and looked to Felelor. 'I can't believe this is what you have to deal with.'

'Yeah, I know, right?' Felelor scoffed, taking a drink. 'Bunch'a arseholes.'

'They're not *that* bad,' Naranako gave a laugh before planting a kiss on Felelor's cheek. He left a notable amount of his lipstick behind as he rose to his feet, though neither he nor his uncle seemed to notice. 'Anyway, Sken wanted me to help Coborn clean up after lunch, so I'll see you all later.'

At the mention of Coborn, Lif leapt out of the tree. 'I'll help, too,' he said coolly— Though not coolly enough to distract from his attempt to fix his hair. 'It'd be rude to leave all the work to the two of you.'

'Yeah,' Trat snickered. 'Because it's the *work* you're thinking about.'

'Wh- Of course it is!' Lif snapped, blush creeping over his cheeks.

'You know she's not going to fuck you, right?' Felelor snorted. 'No matter how nice you are to her.'

Lif's cheeks grew darker, as did his glare.

'I dunno,' Trat punched Lif in the shoulder. 'If he looks pitiful enough she might!'

'Come on, guys,' Naranako took Lif's arm and hung off it, his ears flicking back as he shook his head. 'Can't a guy be nice to a girl without having his motives questioned?'

'Yeah,' Ka'harja chimed in. 'Leave him alone. Jokes like that aren't fun.'

'I think they are,' said Trat.

'That's because you're a piece of shit!' Lif retorted as Naranako dragged him away. He raised his middle finger before disappearing behind one of the caravans.

'Heh, I love that loser,' Trat chuckled as the boys left. 'Bloody idiot though, huh? Coborn, of all girls.'

'Coborn's nice,' Ka'harja commented, much to Trat's amusement.

'Exactly! It'd never work out,' Trat gave a sniff and scratched at a scar along his arm. 'She'd figure out how big a dick he is sooner or later and ditch him.'

'I dunno,' Felelor gave a chuckle. 'I hear girls *like* big dicks.'

Trat choked, and had to cover his mouth and pace a few steps before he could swallow down his laughter.

Ka'harja didn't think it was that funny.

'Speaking of big dicks,' Trat gave another sniff and turned to Felelor to give him a kick. 'Baku. He was wondering if you had any books lying around?'

'What's he want with *my* books?' Felelor snorted. 'He's got his own! And I don't think I've seen him finish one in years!'

'Yeah, nah, it's for Stars,' replied Trat. 'Apparently she's ploughed through all of his *and* Coff's stuff, and now she's looking for something else to attack.'

'Scara, that girl! Are we sure she's actually reading them and not just, I don't know, *eating* the pages?' Felelor shook his head and, with a humoured grunt, pushed himself to his feet. 'Alright. I'll have a poke around and see what I can find, then.'

'Might want to wipe your face, first,' Trat commented as he pulled out a handkerchief. 'Naranako's left his lips behind.'

'Ugh!' Felelor took the cloth from Trat and rubbed at his cheek. 'That kid never learns. Not a damn brain-cell in his head! I've taught him how to put that crap on properly; but *does* he? No! Instead he gets it everywhere like some sort of fourth eclipser!'

'Could be worse,' Ka'harja shrugged.

'Yeah,' Trat laughed as Felelor handed back his handkerchief. 'He could have borrowed Coborn's makeup.'

'Gross,' Felelor huffed, then sucked at the back of his throat and spat noisily on the ground. 'At least Naranako's is a nice colour. I can pass purple off as a bruise.'

'Ah, a bit of pink would do you good!' snorted Trat.

'It's not the pink I'm worried about,' Felelor retorted before motioning for his friend to follow him. 'It's that new cyan shit she brought back in Oktoka! Have you seen it, yet?'

'No, I don't think so....'

The boy's voices trailed off as they made their way back to the caravans, and Ka'harja let out a sigh as he was left in the company of the tree.

The quiet was nice. Mostly.

When it didn't help his thoughts run wild on him.

He scratched at his neck and sniffed. He had a lot of thoughts that could run wild, today.... Maybe it wasn't the best idea to sit on his own.

Another sigh, and Ka'harja pushed himself to his feet.

Maybe his mother was free; though probably not. She'd been spending an awful lot of time with his aunt.

And Dena....

He shook his head.

Dena and his mother had really latched onto each other; especially now that Distro was feeling better. It was great! But also terrible.

Ka'harja was happy for his mother. And for Dena. Neither had many friends and them finding something in each other was a good thing.

Though, he couldn't help but feel a little put-off by it all.

Dena wasn't very nice to him. Sure, she was nicer than she had been a month ago, and it was obvious that she was *trying* to be kind to Ka'harja— But she still had her moments.

He tried not to take it personally; she was like this to everyone except Distro and Stars. Fuck, he'd even heard her lose her temper with Sken before! *Sken!* He'd never have the guts to do that! He barely had the confidence to talk with her normally, let alone pick a fight.

Ka'harja paused as he reached Denni's caravan.

Then, he chuckled.

Denni.

Dena.

It was funny that their names were so similar.

'Ka'harja?' his mother's voice called from inside. 'What are you giggling about out there?'

'Nothing,' Ka'harja replied. 'Sorry, I just wanted to say hi.'

'Well then, don't just hang around the door! Get in here!'

Ka'harja didn't need to be told twice. He slipped inside the homely caravan and looked around.

There were more people than he was expecting.

Denni, Tayal, and Werani were there of course, sitting around a small table with Distro and Dena. He had expected to find at least *some* combination of his family and Dena, that wasn't what caught him off guard— It was Coff and Stars that surprised him.

Coff was sitting at the table with the rest of the group while Stars lay on one of the beds, staring intently at the pages of a thick book with a colourful cover.

Stars didn't acknowledge him (clearly focusing very hard on her reading), but Coff was sitting frozen in his seat with a handful of dice; his eyes wide as he stared straight at Ka'harja.

'Uh,' Ka'harja met eyes with the healer and felt his cheeks start to burn. 'Hey, Coff. Are you... here for my mum?'

'Oh— Uh. H-Hi,' Coff blushed back, and finally seemed to remember what he was doing. He threw the dice across the table but didn't pay attention to where they went, and Distro had to catch them as they nearly rolled off the edge. 'Um.... Sort of. Sh-She in-invited me to... uh....'

Ka'harja gave a nod as Coff motioned the the game pieces and map laid haphazardly in front of them. 'You play Caves and Creatures?'

'Um, y-yes. I... ' Coff looked away, now, and began counting what he'd rolled. 'I thought I.... I thought I mentioned....'

'Oh um... maybe?' Ka'harja couldn't recall if he'd spoken to Coff about the game

before. Though, it didn't surprise him that he couldn't remember; *he always had such a terrible memory....* 'You probably did. You know me. It's like throwing slices of meat at a window; nothing really stays stuck for long.'

Coff gave a half-chuckle before biting his lip and motioning to Denni. 'Uh, twenty-six damage.'

'Well, y've made a mess, that's fer sure,' Denni chuckled. 'Y'send th'seces halfway cross th'room, knockin' over plates and chairs and others, 'til 'e crashes in'tah 'is mates and all of 'em tumble t' th'floor. After a second, y'notice a pool of blood startin' t'form under 'im.'

'Is he dead?' Dena asked, curiously.

'Gone have t'check t'see.'

The table all glanced to Tayal, who shook his head.

'Uh-uh! Nah, Morellin ain't gone go *near* that guy, even if 'e ain't breathin'!' Tayal exclaimed. 'Bastard tried t'kill 'er! Sh'ain't checkin' on 'im!'

'You have the highest healer's stats,' Distro argued. 'You're the one who'll be able to tell if he's really dead!'

'Nup! Sh'ain't doin' it!'

'Uh, y-you guys k-keep pl-playing,' Coff waved a hand and stood, taking Ka'harja by the arm and giving him a tug. 'I, uh, w-want t-to t-t-t-talk to-to—'

'Aight, see ya in a bit, ay?' Werani waved a dismissive hand, before turning to join in the arguing. '*Well ah ain't goin' in!*' he said, his voice high as he spoke in-character. '*Th'seces 'most killed me! Ah can't—*'

Ka'harja didn't catch the rest of the sentence as Coff dragged him outside.

'Th-thank Scara you c-came in wh-when you-you did!' Coff exclaimed, a relieved look passing over his face as he sighed heavily. 'I-I d-don't know h-how much— Much more I-I-I c-could t-take of th-that!'

'Yeah, they're a *lot* with that game, aren't they?' Ka'harja chuckled, giving a shrug. 'Part of why I don't play. I mean, that, and that I can't focus on it for more than ten minutes.'

Coff gave a nervous chuckle, and gave his stubbly facial hair a rub. 'I-I th-think I prefer-er-er pl-playing with B-Bak-Baku and C-Coborn.'

'Understandable,' Ka'harja chuckled. 'They seem a lot more level-headed about this sort of thing.'

'Y-Y-Yeah,' Coff agreed. 'N-No off-offense t-to your m-mother, b-but... sh-sh-she... uh....'

'She flipped the table again, didn't she?'

'Yeah,' Coff let out a wheeze of a laugh.

'Yeah,' Ka'harja echoed. 'She does that— Aw, *fuck!*'

Ka'harja let out a shout and stumbled forward as something roughly the same size, shape, and weight as Stars leapt onto his back and clung onto him.

'Stars?!' he exclaimed as managed to right himself. 'Don't *do* that!'

'Why not?' Stars giggled, pulling herself close into Ka'harja so she could bury her face into his hair. 'Kekik Distro does it to you!'

'Mum's half your size!' Ka'harja retorted, unable to hide a laugh as he hooked his

arms under Stars' legs and pulled her up so her knees weren't digging into his back. 'You almost knocked me over!'

'But I didn't,' Stars said, a cheeky note to her voice. 'You're still standing up just fine!'

'Barely!'

'Maka!' Stars gave a giggle. 'You're fine!'

'I'm not a liar,' Ka'harja lied. 'I've never told a single lie. Not once in my entire life!'

Coff let out a small chuckle, covering his mouth as he did, and Ka'harja felt his heart skip a beat.

Coff's laughter was so beautiful....

'I'm very glad you're my friend, Ka'harja,' Stars said, burying her face into Ka'harja's hair as she did. 'You're the best friend I've ever had. I love you. Kosson.'

'Heh, thanks. You're a really good friend, too. Kosson, Stars. Kosson,' Ka'harja chuckled, adjusting his grip on Stars as she gave an excited wiggle. Then, he eyed Coff and felt his heart beat harder. 'Uh... so. Coff? You said you wanted to talk to me about something?'

'O-Oh, y-yeah, no,' Coff went bright red. 'I-I l-ied. I just n-needed an ex-excuse t-to l-leave....'

Ka'harja couldn't help but laugh. 'Oh, yeah. I uh.... I understand. Mum's one thing, but Denni and Tayal are another.'

'Y-You can s-say th-that again....'

'Oh, can I do it this time?' Stars shifted on Ka'harja's back.

'Uh... sure?' Ka'harja chuckled. 'Go ahead.'

'Kekik Distro is one thing, but Denni and Tayal are another!'

Coff echoed Ka'harja's laughter, rubbing the back of his neck as he did. 'Wh-What do T-Tayal and D-Denni e-even d-d-d-do? B-Beside b-being an-annoy-annoying? Th-They don't h-have any-anything to s-sell.... How d-do they...?'

'Oh, they're mail couriers,' Ka'harja explained. 'They have a route from here all the way to Canis and back. Though...' Ka'harja trailed off; feeling his heart drop. He couldn't tell Coff that the felinics sometimes skimmed things from their parcels, could he?

'Though...?' Coff echoed, curiously.

'Well.... They're felinic,' Ka'harja gave a hesitant click of his tongue. He wasn't sure how Coff would react to the idea of someone *stealing*. It made him so nervous, being a thief himself— What if Coff condemned it? What if he thought it was some kind of unforgivable act? *He had to tread carefully....* 'And you know how felinics.... Well.... Denni and Tayal never really *grew up* if you get what I mean?'

'They st-steal?' Coff asked, simply.

'Usually just food,' Ka'harja quickly added, feeling his hands grow sweaty and sticky on Stars' legs. 'Or money to rent a room. You know?'

'I-I mean. I-I can un-underst-st-stand th-that. The— The r-road's not al-always f-fair to t-t-travellers.'

'I used to steal,' Stars said, wrapping her arms tighter around Ka'harja's shoulders. 'When Lah'kort wouldn't feed me enough I would wait until everyone was asleep and then take food from Kay'oten's store.... She thought I was too stupid to lie about doing it,

so I never got caught. Turns out *she* was the stupid one!

'Heh...' Ka'harja gave a nervous chuckle at mention of Kay'oten, and carefully bent down to deposit Stars on the ground.

It took her a moment to understand that Ka'harja was putting her down, but when she did she quickly slipped off his back onto her own feet and all but danced her way in front of him. 'Ka'harja! Have you ever read Adoration's Obsession?'

'Huh?' Ka'harja blinked dumbly as he stood up straight. 'What's who?'

'Adoration's Obsession,' Stars repeated. 'It's a book! Baku lent it to me. It's about a "zokex" who's outcast from other zokex! Though, I don't... know what a zokex is.'

'Just another race,' Ka'harja chuckled. 'You know. Like there's nurlak, foxen, dassen, secas... there's also zokex.'

'Ah! I see!' Stars beamed. Then, her face fell. 'It's very strange. She really likes nurlak a lot. Which I thought would be nice because nobody in Heck'ne ever seems to like nurlak, but.... I don't like the *way* she likes us. I don't know why, but it feels very wrong.'

'It-it's supposed to b-be un-un-un— It's supposed to be uncomfortable,' Coff chimed in. 'It's ac-actually a f-fantasy retelling of the d-dassen o-origin t-tale. Ad-Adoration w-was a r-real p-person who fet-fetishised nurlak. Sh-She k-kidnapped a n-nurlak ch-child and— And— And—' he took a deep breath. 'She killed a nurlak child and stole their sk-skin.'

'Oh...' Stars looked *very* uneasy at that. 'I liked her better when she was fake.'

'Mm,' Coff gave an agreeable hum. 'Y-Yeah. I-I, uh, th-think every-every— I think every-one-one who learns about her h-has th-that thought.'

The queasy look didn't leave Stars' face as she shuffled in place; her ears flicking back and forth as if she was listening out for something.

'Stars...?' Ka'harja asked, gently. 'You alright?'

'I need to see my Little Demon!' she blurted, turning on her heels and bolting off towards the middle of camp.

'Oh, um— Okay!' Ka'harja exclaimed as Stars ran off. 'Should we... make sure she's alright?'

'Y-Yeah, I th-think s-so,' Coff answered. The healer rubbed his arm for a moment before starting after the nurlak woman.

The boys followed Stars at a much more casual pace; catching a glimpse of her clambering into Sken and Annanyn's caravan as they turned a corner.

She'd left the door ajar, and when Ka'harja poked his head in and politely knocked he found Stars clutching her baby tightly as Sken and Annanyn watched on, confused-but-sympathetic expressions on their faces.

Sken cast Ka'harja and Coff a glance as they entered, and Ka'harja just shrugged.

'There's child murder in the book she's reading,' he told them.

'Oh...' Annanyn breathed, giving a little nod as her confusion turned to understanding. 'Yeah. That'd freak me out too, I think.'

Sken's hands found their way to Stars' shoulders, squeezing them as she gently turned Stars and guided her to a nearby chair. 'Come on. Let's get you sat down....'

Chapter End.

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