

## Chapter 28: Mrerf 7<sup>th</sup>, Yieda Year 10,053 AE (A Circle on the Floor; Sken's Caravan)

For the past hour and a half Ka'harja had been constantly reminded of just how terrible he was at math.

After Stars had sat down and had a moment to breathe, Annanyn had made the suggestion they play a game to get her mind off things— It was, however, a math game. And even though Ka'harja hated math, he really liked Stars. So he'd agreed to play with her and the others.

*Troubling Travels*, it was called.

He'd heard of the game a few times before, though he'd never actually *played* it. It was half a board game, half a gambling game, and apparently the reason his great-grandmother (on his grandmother's side) had divorced her husband.

And now he could see why.

He bit his tongue as Stars rolled her coins, moved her piece, and picked up the card from the tile she'd landed on.

'I... is... *ice*...?' she read, slowly, before turning to Sken and handing the woman the card. 'I don't know what this says.'

'Island,' Sken read aloud. 'With a silent 'S'.... *Island hopper, take another turn.*'

Stars grinned, picking up the five movement coins and shaking them loosely in her hands. 'What is an island, anyway?' she asked as she threw the coins to the floor and began counting the ones that had landed on heads. 'I've heard that word a few times but I can't figure out what it means.'

*Three spaces*, Ka'harja noted as she took her second turn and collected two coins from the pot.

'An island is a, uh... a big bit of land,' Annanyn tried. 'In the ocean?'

'What's the ocean?'

'Uh....'

Ka'harja gave a sniff, casting a sideways glance to Coff as the healer scooped up the coins to roll his own turn. 'You know how sometimes it rains and you see big puddles, and those puddles have the tops of rocks sticking out of them?'

*Coff moved two spaces.*

'Yeah?' Stars twitched an ear curiously.

'Like that,' Ka'harja said, retrieving the coins and throwing them down. 'The water is the ocean and the rocks are islands. Only the ocean is so big that we'd be like ants on the rocks.'

'Oh...' Stars' twitching ear stuck up straight. 'Like the big water that Zen'efay and her sisters flew over to get to Rendi?'

'Yeah, just like that,' he confirmed. 'Uh... no heads. I don't move.'

'Sucks to be you,' Sken joked as she collected up the coins and tossed them onto the floor again. 'Three spaces.... *Fuck.*'

'Aw, *no*,' Annanyn gave her wife a sympathetic pat on the back. 'Again?'

Sken flicked one of the coins she'd collected back into the pot, and leant over to retrieve a card from the deck. 'Bloody hell, that is the *fourth* lose tile I've landed on in a row!' she complained, placing the card she'd drawn face-down on the tile to change its status. 'Luck's not on my side, today.'

'If it makes you feel better, luck's *never* on *my* side,' Ka'harja said, offering the secas a sheepish grin.

'So what you're saying is this is *your* fault?' Sken teased. Then she shook her head. 'Do your games always turn out like this?'

'Oh, I've never actually played board games before,' Ka'harja admitted. 'Mum banned them from the house.'

'What?' Annanyn's tail-tip flicked in confusion and her fin hit the ground with a quiet *plat!* 'Why?'

All Ka'harja could do was cast Annanyn a raised-brow look and shake his head. 'Look at her friends and take a guess.'

'They cheat?' Sken asked, returning Ka'harja's look with her own as he nodded.

'*Oooh*,' Stars gave a low, knowing hum. 'That explains....'

'Explains what?'

'Why Tayal got mad at Kekik Distro when I told her she'd miscounted her dice roll,' said Stars. 'She miscounted on purpose, didn't she? She was cheating, wasn't she?'

'Y-Yeah,' Coff gave a quick nod. 'Sh-She was ch-ch-ch-ch— She was cheating. S-So was W-W-Wer-Wer-Wer.... Werani.'

'*You* better not be cheating,' Sken joked, nudging Ka'harja.

'No, of course not,' Ka'harja raised his hands in mock-defence. 'I mean. Just look at this cute little face and tell me I'm capable of lying, let alone *cheating!*'

Coff snorted a laugh, covering his mouth to smother it as Sken flicked her eyes at him and shook her head.

Then she looked at Ka'harja with a cool, humoured expression. 'The only reason you haven't been cheating is because you're scared of me, yeah?'

'Yeah,' Ka'harja answered. 'Bang on.'

Annanyn gave her own giggle, which she quickly swallowed down as she collected the coins for her turn. 'I've been cheating this entire game.'

'*Annanyn!*' Sken exclaimed as she turned to her wife with an exasperated gasp.

'I think I would cheat, if I didn't like you all so much,' Stars added with an agreeable nod.

'Stars— Ugh!' Sken threw her hands in the air playfully. 'Am I the only honest one here?'

'I-I-I-I—' Coff raised his hand.

A humoured snort escaped Sken's gills as she looked to the man. 'Ah. At least *someone* here has some integrity!'

Ka'harja couldn't help but laugh as Coff lowered his hand, and he nudged his.... Wait, *was* Coff his boyfriend?

They'd both expressed an interest in each other. And Coff had kissed him. But they'd never actually explicitly... *agreed*... that they were boyfriends....

Was it overstepping a boundary to assume...?

It didn't seem like it, but... he still couldn't be sure.

'Ka'harja, you okay?' Sken asked.

'Uh... yeah,' Ka'harja mumbled, pulling himself out of his thoughts. 'Just thinking about...' he cast a glance to Coff, feeling himself blush. '*Stuff.*'

The healer's cheeks flushed pink as Ka'harja met his eye, and after a moment both boys glanced away from each other.

Much to Sken's delight.

'You two are *adorable!*' she teased, scooping up the abandoned coins on the floor and passing them to Stars. 'Nothing quite like seeing a new couple flounder about.'

'*Mhm!* Brings back some memories, doesn't it?' Annanyn gave a giggle, flicking her wife playfully on the nose. 'When we first got together Sken had *no* idea what she was doing! I basically had to hold her hand through the first year.... I could tell you some stories.'

Sken's cheeks blushed pink and purple, and she rubbed the back of her neck.

'C'mon, puddle-hopper, don't embarrass me.'

'Naw, *Skenny!*' Annanyn teased, shifting so she could press tight against her wife.

'It's my *job* to embarrass you!'

Sken coughed, clearing her throat as her blush deepened and she looked to the floor in a sheepish way. She bit her lip, trying to hide her grin as Annanyn pressed against her.

'Naw, come on, my *widdle kelp-knot!* Don't you—'

'Gighi, it is easy to cheat!' Stars' loud exclamation interrupted Annanyn's teasing, and everyone turned to see Stars dropping a handful of coins into the small pile she'd already collected. 'Nobody noticed I took three times as many coins I was meant to!'

'*Stars!*'

## **Chapter End.**

If you enjoyed reading, you can find more of this world on ***demrefor.com***

You can also donate and help me pay the bills at ***ko-fi.com/jadewyton***

And, if you're interested in my non-Demrefor related work, head over to  
***cjadewyton.com***