

Chapter 29:
Mrerf 20th, Firthda
Year 10,053 AE
(The Caravan's Campsite; The Okatako-Bokwok Border)

It was the twentieth day of the Newgrowth season, and the weather was finally starting to behave as it should.

It was still cold and damp —as it always was in this part of the Empire— but the sun had started coming out consistently and the plants were drinking in its life-giving light and budding with new foliage.

That morning the grass around the campsite had bloomed with thousands of colourful flowers that hadn't been visible the evening before. And everyone had agreed that it was beautiful.

So beautiful, in fact, that when Stars had let out a cry of excitement and begun running through the hilly grassland, Sken had decided to wait a while before setting out for the day; giving everyone a few hours to soak in the sunshine however they thought best.

Ka'harja had enjoyed his time so far. He'd spent the first twenty-or-so minutes of it lounging by the long-extinguished campfire; watching as Baku, Naranako, and Trat pulled all the soulstone lamps out of storage to charge them. It wasn't a chore assigned to them, but something they had *decided* to do on their own (though Ka'harja couldn't for the life of him understand why they'd do *extra* work like that!) while everyone else was relaxing.

Koko, of course, was asleep after the night watch. And Felelor had taken to sitting by her side to keep his own watch over camp.

Distro and her friends were in Denni's caravan alongside poor Coff (who had been dragged in against his will), playing some game or another, while Stars was running around; Annanyn babysitting her son while Sken checked the caravans over for any needed repairs.

He wasn't entirely sure where Coborn had gotten to, though he knew that Lif had run off after her.

And Krarf... still existed. Somewhere. Ka'harja *thought* he still did, anyway. He hadn't actually *seen* Krarf for about two days. But the cart-pullers had food in their troughs so he could only assume that Krarf hadn't blipped out of existence overnight.

He'd turn up. Probably.

Ka'harja gave a sniff and lay back, letting the warm sun shine down on his face as he closed his eyes and relaxed.

It was a beautiful feeling. And a beautiful day! He could lay here forever, he thought. Not moving. Not worrying about anything.

Just enjoying that Newgrowth sun.

Ka'harja let out a deep, deep sigh... and heard it echoed from his side.

He peeked open an eye and saw that Sken had sat on the log beside him; though she had barely seemed to notice him as she faced the other way with her chin in a hand

and her tail swishing side-to-side in a frustrated way.

For a moment he watched her. Then he sat up and, seeing the miserable scowl on her face, followed her eye across camp.

Annanyn and Stars were talking, again.

A short *pop!* sounded from Sken's gills as she watched them. And then her tail-barb gave an annoyed flick and she brought it up to her lap to hold it still.

Ka'harja wasn't sure if he should make himself known or not.... Though, when Stars threw her arms around Annanyn happily and Sken let out a long, furious breath and let her tail flick back out sideways, Ka'harja thought it was best to clear his throat to avoid being accidentally stabbed.

'*Hm?*' Sken was immediately distracted; her entire demeanour changing as she cast an embarrassed-looking glance down at the man on the ground.

'You alright?' Ka'harja asked, lifting himself up to sit on the log beside her.

For a long moment, Sken didn't answer. Then she let out a sigh through her gills and turned back to watch her wife and Stars. 'Yeah. I'm fine.'

'You seem...' Ka'harja couldn't find the words for it, and so instead just made a weird motion with his hands.

'I feel...' Sken returned the motion; though she ended it with a choking motion.

'She loves you,' Ka'harja offered, not sure what else to say. 'Whenever we're alone you're all she talks about.'

Sken looked even *more* embarrassed, at that, and her fins drooped miserably. 'I know.... It's just.... *I* know that. But the little voice in my brain doesn't.'

'Yeah?'

'Yeah,' Sken sighed, her voice flat and frustrated as she continued, 'It says; "Sken, you hideous loser! She deserves someone better! Someone beautiful! Someone who can give her everything she deserves! She's going to get tired of you, just like Raoul did!"'

'See,' Ka'harja took a deep breath and sat up straighter, clicking his tongue in a mock-playful way. '*My* little voice says; "Ka'harja you stupid piece of shit, why would you say that? Why would you— Stop talking! Stop it! Put the shovel down! The hole's deep enough! Stop digging! Stop it!"'

It earned a laugh from the secas, who wiped a forming tear from her eye and finally smiled. 'Well. I'm glad I'm not the only one with a mean little voice inside me.'

'I'm pretty sure everyone has one of those,' Ka'harja comforted; raising a hand to put on Sken's shoulder but stopping short before he actually made contact. He let his hand hover for a second (which got him another laugh) before pulling it back and resting it on his knee. 'Some people are just better at ignoring it, I think.'

'Hm!' Sken scoffed playfully. 'I dunno about that. Your aunt Denni doesn't seem to think too badly of herself. I think her voice might be cheering her on.'

It was Ka'harja who laughed, this time. 'Hah! Yeah. Pretty sure it's what tells her to take half our spoons whenever she visits!'

A happy squeal sounded from Sken's gills as she chuckled, and Ka'harja was glad he'd been able to help her feel better. Even if it was only a little bit.

'Actually. You know who has a mean voice?' Ka'harja felt himself pulling a face. 'Koko.'

'No!' Sken scoffed a laugh.

'Koko's really mean.'

'No!' Sken pushed. Her tone was still playful, but her expression grew serious as she looked away to examine a clawed hand. 'She's... she's a little rough around the edges, but she's got a good heart.'

'Yeah?'

'Yeah! I mean, you know she was the one who—' Sken cut off, seemingly catching herself as she blushed dark pink and purple. 'Who... um....'

Ka'harja twitched an ear to show he was listening.

'She was the one who found me after Raoul... did *this*,' she looked at her scarred arms, then, a forlorn look passing over her. 'She left her old caravan to look after me. I owe her... *everything*...' Sken's eyes flicked back up to Annanyn and she let out a heavy sigh. 'Hm.... Hey? Ka'harja?'

'Yeah?'

'Help a coward out?' Sken asked. 'I can't seem to get up the guts to go and interrupt them.'

'I can do that,' Ka'harja said, pushing himself to his feet and offering Sken a hand. 'You know, it's a shame that you don't like Stars. She's actually pretty nice.'

'It's not that I don't like Stars,' Sken corrected, accepting Ka'harja's help to stand. 'She's great! And that's... kind of the problem. She's funny and sweet, and I don't like how much time she spends with Annanyn while being so funny and sweet. And I know it's wrong of me to feel that way, but I just....'

She made the choking hand motion again.

Ka'harja gave a nod.

He understood. Mostly, anyway.

He'd never really been a jealous person. Sure, he got jealous sometimes. But the way Sken had looked at Stars? He wasn't sure he'd ever felt *any* emotion *that* intense, before. Except maybe fear— But that didn't count.

Walking in pace with Sken, Ka'harja made his way over to Stars. He hooked his arm into one of her own so he could pull her backwards in a playful circle; yanking her away from Annanyn as Sken leant in close and whispered something to her wife that made the woman tut and stroke Sken's cheek in a reassuring way as she adjusted Little Demon against her chest.

But Ka'harja only caught a glimpse of it as he tugged Stars over the flower-filled grass. The nurlak let out a giggle as she stumbled around, trying desperately to not lose her footing as she batted at her friend.

'Ka'harja!' she laughed, her voice high as she gave a happy squeal. 'A'la'ha! Broja'nikar kaka! You're making me get all dizzy! It will be bakti to stand if you don't let me go!'

'Ah, falling over's never hurt me!' Ka'harja teased, spinning her faster. 'Come on! Spin time!'

'You're making my basaka all bakti!' she squealed through her joy. 'Stop! I can't think! Ka'harja! Kaka! I'm going to fall down—'

It was Ka'harja who lost his footing, first, and landed on top of her.

'Oh, you're heavy!' Stars giggled, pushing her arms into Ka'harja's shoulders in an attempt to shove him off her. 'Off! Off me, you hakalika tisi'maar!'

'Tisi'marr?!' Ka'harja gasped, mock-offended, and leant more of his weight down on his friend. 'I'm not a shit!'

'Yi! You *are!*' Stars retorted playfully, trying to wiggle free but only managing to pin herself tighter against the ground. 'You are a very big and heavy shit! Get off me, Ka'harja! *Off!*'

'Nah!'

'Yi! Or else!'

'Or else what— *AH!*' Ka'harja let out a squawk of surprise as Stars grabbed him by the ears with one set of arms and began poking him in the sides with her others. 'No! Stop! Don't poke me, that tickles! That tickles! Ah! *AH!*'

'Get off her, Ka'harja!' Sken's chuckle broke through Ka'harja's cries, and he felt Sken's hands grasp his shoulders and pull him away from his friend. Then she glanced to Stars and gave a humoured flick of her tail. 'You're getting better at rough-housing.'

'Yi! Baku has been teaching me how to defend myself!' Stars beamed; looking to the secas with pride. 'I'm tired of people hurting me and I want to be able to stop them. So Baku has been helping me to learn how!'

'You're doing well,' Sken acknowledged. Then, she laughed again as Stars stayed laying on her back and let her hands fall limply into the grass. 'You alright?'

'*I still can't believe how beautiful the sky is,*' she said, softly. '*It is so beautiful....*
OH! BIRDS!'

Ka'harja, Sken, and Annanyn all glanced up as Stars pointed to the sky. They were greeted with a large flock of birds swirling through the sky in a pattern that Ka'harja thought resembled colourful dye dropped in still water.

'Oh,' Ka'harja felt himself give a laugh. 'Look at that! Birds!'

Chapter End.

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