

Chapter 30: Mrerf 30th, Grada Year 10,053 AE (Coff's Bed; Coff's Caravan)

A loud, shrill sound roused Ka'harja from his slumber and he gave a groan as he rolled over and tried to open his bleary eyes.

He was in Coff's bed again, while the healer was face-down in a book at his desk. That was how it had been all month. Ever since the pair had admitted their feelings for each other, Ka'harja had slept in Coff's bed... and the man had almost always forgotten to join him.

He was still getting used to calling Coff his boyfriend.

Boyfriend.

Great Star, almost six weeks and he was still trying to process it all!

The shrill sound continued, and Ka'harja scratched his head and sat up.

He was growing familiar with the sound of Little Demon's crying.... Though, that didn't mean he disliked it any less than the first time he heard it.

Ka'harja slipped out of Coff's bed, careful not to bump the healer as he passed, and hurried over to the other bed.

His mother was gone —most likely spending time with her feline friends and Dena — and in her place was the old wicker basket that Little Demon slept in.

It was a battered thing, worn with age; Sken had pulled it out of one of the caravans and emptied the tools it held into a bucket so that it could be padded with soft cloth and made comfortable for the infant.

Ka'harja remembered how grateful Stars had been and... and....

He couldn't think with Little Demon crying so much....

'*Shh,*' he shushed, gently, and scooped the baby up. 'Come on.... Shut up.... You're fine....'

Little Demon did not shut up. No. In fact, much to Ka'harja's discomfort, the infant began to scream even louder.

'*Ooohkay*.... What if I bounce you? Do you want to be bounced?' Ka'harja tried, sitting on the bed so he could rest Little Demon on his knee and bounce him up and down. 'Bounce bounce— Alright. *Shh*.... That's *clearly* not what you want....'

Lifting Little Demon up to his chest, Ka'harja rested the infant on his shoulder and began to pet him on the back.

'*Shh*.... You're alright,' Ka'harja comforted. 'Come on, little buddy. You're alright.... You're—'

Little Demon burped and Ka'harja felt something warm and wet spatter against his back.

'*Thanks,*' he sighed, resisting the urge to throw the baby across the room in disgust. *At least he'd stopped crying*.... 'Does that feel better?' he asked. He tried to turn his voice into a sweet coo for the child, but he was far too tired and it came out as more of a mumble. 'Did you have a stomach ache? Yeah. They suck, don't they? But you're all

better now.... Where's your mum gone, huh? Where's she gone?'

'Stars...' Coff's voice mumbled, and Ka'harja turned to see him peeling his face off his book. 'Distro was.... She was going to take Stars to... to the river to bathe.... They didn't.... They didn't w-want Little Demon by the water. I... I said they could leave him here while I studied, but....'

'You fell asleep?' Ka'harja gave an exhausted chuckle.

'Mm...' Coff gave an agreeable hum. 'Sorry... I-I should have been... been w-watching him, b-b-b-better.'

'Nah, it's fine, babies cry,' Ka'harja reassured, giving Little Demon a soft *pat-pat* on the back. He was grateful that he didn't throw up again. 'That's why I hate the little shits.'

'You h-h-hate babies?' Coff asked.

'Can't stand them,' said Ka'harja.

'M-Me e-e-either,' Coff admitted with a chuckle. 'I-I h-had enou-enou-enou— I had enough of b-babies after my br-brothers were b-born. I had to l-look after th-them a-a lot.... I-It's the o-one th-thing I don't m-miss about— About home....'

'That and your ex, right?'

'R-Right,' Coff laughed again. Then, he sighed and toed at a book on the floor. 'I... I'm j-just j-joking about my— My brothers,' he clarified. 'I-I g-g-got my ap-apprenticeship t-t- t-to.... To help look after them.'

'I... think someone mentioned that at some point,' Ka'harja's brow furrowed as he tried to recall the conversation. 'I can't remember... *who*... but they said you send most of your money home, right?'

'R-Right,' Coff confirmed. 'Sk-Sken's r-really nice a-abou-abou-abou-*about* it. Sh-She doesn't m-make me p-pay for my equ-equ-equ— The medial supplies f-for my w-work.'

'Oh, yeah?'

'Y-Yeah. I-It's kind of l-like having... having a s-second family,' Coff admitted. 'It-It's n-nice.'

'Yeah,' Ka'harja gave the man a grin. 'I get that. I know I haven't really been here long but it *does* feel like a family.'

Coff chuckled and rubbed his eyes. 'S-Sorry. I'm st-still a l-little tired. I-I had a-a w-weird dr-dream.'

'Oh, so did I!' Ka'harja grinned. 'I was in a market, trying to buy ingredients, but my hands were made of tree branches—'

'Th-that was *m-my* dream,' Coff interrupted, taking on a serious tone. 'K-Ka'harja.... You're a, uh.... Y-You kn-know you're a-a....'

'A what?' Ka'harja asked; petting Little Demon on the back again as he hiccuped and mumbled.

'*Dream walker?*' Coff said, raising his brow.

'What?' for a long moment, Ka'harja just stared. Then he laughed. 'Crock! I'm not a dream master.'

'Yes, y-you are!' Coff exclaimed, exasperated. He threw his arms out, slapping them down loud against his sides as he shook his head. 'I-I— You *are!* H-How can you n-

not s-see it?!

'I...' Ka'harja hesitated.... Then he shrugged and gave another laugh. 'Coff. Come on. I'm not magic. *Look* at me.'

A deep, deep sigh escaped Coff, then. 'Y-You're acting like it's— Like it's *em-barrassing* t-to have m-m-magic.'

'No—'

'I-It's not!' Coff continued, and Ka'harja cut off to let him finish. 'It-It's not em-barrassing. *I'm* magic!'

'Wh.... You're magic?' Ka'harja asked, his ears flicking up in surprised.

'I-I'm a pr-prophet,' Coff said with a long breath.

'*Really?*' Ka'harja's eyes went wide. 'I... I had no idea.'

'Mm,' Coff shrugged. 'It... it's w-weak but I, uh... s-sometimes I s-see things before they... before they h-happen.'

'Huh....'

'Mm...' Coff cleared his throat, looking away. Then he sniffed the air and frowned. 'D-Did L-Little D-Demon... throw up?'

'Yeah,' Ka'harja turned around to show off his back. 'Right before you woke up.'

'Oh— Oh Sc-Scara! G-Give h-him to m-me,' Coff leapt to his feet and took Little Demon from Ka'harja. 'I-I'm s-s-s-s-so s-s-sorry!'

'*Eh,*' Ka'harja gave a dismissive grunt as he pulled off his shirt and discarded it by the door. 'I've had worse on me before.'

'Y-You kn-know, for s-someone who h-hates babies you're— You're— You're v-very pa-pa-patient with th-them,' Coff said.

'Well, I mean... it's not *his* fault he's a baby,' Ka'harja pointed out. 'If I'm gonna be mad at anyone about this, I'll be mad at Stars for leaving him with us.'

'O-Oh. So... you're mad at St-Stars, th-then?'

'Nah, she needs the break,' Ka'harja said with a chuckle. 'And it's kinda sweet that she trusts us like this. You know?'

'Mh!' Coff gave a nod, and shifting Little Demon into a more comfortable position. 'She's v-very tr-trusting. I-I didn't ex-expect h-her to b-be. After all she's— All she's been through. I-I don't th-think I-I'd be so-so tr-trusting if I'd....'

Ka'harja nodded as Coff trailed off, and the two men spent a moment in silence.

Slowly, Coff's eyes trailed the room; eventually coming to rest on Ka'harja.

'What?' Ka'harja chuckled.

'Th-That was y-your only sh-shirt, wasn't— Wasn't it?'

'*Yeah,*' Ka'harja gave a sheepish grin. 'I can't wait to get into town and get a new one. It'd already had it *before* I lost the rest of my wardrobe....'

Ka'harja was the one to trail off and leave them in silence this time.

Eighth Child of the Ninth, why did it feel so awkward?!

He'd been dating Coff for over half a month, now, and he could barely look the man in the eye!

He'd never felt this way before with any of his previous partners! Why was Coff so different?!

Coff stepped closer, then, and Ka'harja's heart beat faster as the healer took his hand and squeezed it. 'Ka'harja, I-I, uh—'

The caravan door opened loudly, and both boys flinched as they turned to see Stars making her way inside.

'Hello, Coff! Hello, Ka'harja!' Stars greeted with a grin. 'Oh! My Little Demon! You're awake! Kosson, my most mip berr. Kizza kosson!'

Ka'harja had to put a hand over his mouth to stop himself giggling as Stars took her baby from Coff and embraced him lovingly in two of her arms.

'Oh, Coff, thank you so much for looking after him for me!' she thanked, using her free arms to hug Coff as well. 'It is very helpful and I appreciate it a lot! Thank you! You're a mip friend— I mean, a *good* friend!'

'Ka'harja h-helped,' Coff mumbled into her ribs. 'H-He u-uh.... I f-fell as-asleep....'

'Yeah, where's *my* hug?' Ka'harja joked— Though, he was only halfway through saying it before Stars had released Coff and thrown her arms around him. 'Ah, there it is!'

'Thank you too, Ka'harja,' Stars told him. Then, she pulled away and grinned from ear-to-ear; clearly resisting the urge to bounce up and down in excitement as she rose up on her toys and puffed out her chest. 'Oh! Oh! Sken said that we'll be able to see town in a few weeks! Isn't that exciting?! I've been reading about towns! And cities! And I can't *wait* to see what a town is really like! It sounds so exciting! And! And my kekik says that your kekik Distro is going to let us live with you! I can't *wait* to live together! I'm so excited! Are you excited, Ka'harja?'

'Uh...' Ka'harja gave an awkward chuckle, letting what Stars had said sink in.

Just a few weeks from town....

He swallowed, castling a look to Coff.

Just a few weeks... before he'd leave the caravan.

It was clear Coff realised the same thing, as his ears flicked back and his smile fell into a dejected expression.

In just a few weeks, he and Coff would have to....

'Aren't you excited, Ka'harja?' Stars repeated, taking Ka'harja by the arm and giving him a tug. 'Kekik Distro says that when we have a house —like you used to have— we'll be "set for life"! Though... I'm not actually sure what that means. But it *sounds* like a good thing!'

'Y... Yeah,' Ka'harja managed. 'Yeah. It is is a good thing. I'm... excited.'

Stars paused, then, cocking her head and twitching her ears curiously at Ka'harja's tone. 'You don't sound like you're very excited, Ka'harja,' she pointed out. 'You sound very sad. Mup, Ka'harja. You sound mup. What's wrong?'

Ka'harja looked back to Coff, and Stars turned to the other man.

She stared for a moment before turning back to Ka'harja.

Then back to Coff.

Then back to Ka'harja.

'This is the best relationship I've ever been in,' Ka'harja admitted; his eyes not moving from Coff's. 'I don't... want to....'

'Y-Yeah,' Coff agreed. 'I.... I l-love....'

Ka'harja blushed as Coff trailed off. 'I... love you too.'

'I love you both,' Stars chimed in, putting a hand on each boy's shoulder and bringing them close. 'Why are you so sad?'

Coff just sighed at the question. And so when Stars turned to him, Ka'harja knew he had to explain it to her....

'When we get to town... I'll be staying,' Ka'harja said, swallowing the lump in his throat. 'But... Coff... won't be.'

Stars stared at Ka'harja for a long, long moment as she processed his words.... Then, her ears fell and her shoulders slacked and she held her baby just a little bit closer.

'Oh...' she gave the boys a sympathetic look. 'I understand. When Little Demon's yalfit had to leave I felt the same.... But you shouldn't be sad about having to be apart— If you're sad about that, you'll forget to enjoy the time you still have together!'

It made sense; though Ka'harja wasn't sure it was what he'd wanted to hear.

'Why don't we go outside?' Stars suggested, her ears slowly flicking up. 'Being outside always helps me feel better. It might help you, too!'

'Um... I don't know,' Ka'harja bit his lip and shrugged. 'Coff? What do you think?'

'I-I th-think it's a-a g-g-g-g—' Coff cut off, swallowing, and let out a long breath. 'I th-think it's a g-good id-idea. S-Sitting in-inside i-i-isn't g-going to h-help. W-We sh-should en-enjoy ours-selves while we c-can.'

Ka'harja nodded. 'Alright.... Stars? What do you want to do?'

'Oh! Oh!' Stars gripped Ka'harja's arm tight and gave him a happy shake. 'Baku and Lif and Trat were clearing room so they could play ball! We should play ball with them!'

'Sure,' though he didn't mean it to, it came out as a sigh. 'Why not?'

Chapter End.

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