

**Chapter 31:**  
**Jasfe 4<sup>th</sup>, Firthda**  
**Year 10,053 AE**  
**(Just Outside of Town; Kokako Boaka)**

It was late afternoon when they spotted the town on the horizon. Just a small smudge of colourful painted roofs against the never-ending green expanse of hills, sitting directly below the almost-evening sun.

It made Ka'harja's skin itch to look at it.

*There it was.*

His new home.

An unfamiliar place that was probably crowded and busy and loud.... He knew immediately that it wasn't anywhere near as big as the city he had visited during his brief holiday to Bonark. But he thought, looking at it grow larger and larger as they slowly approached, that it might make him just as uncomfortable.

There was a sense of dread in his chest now that was gripping tightly at his heart and trying to strangle it. He thought he might be sick. So he swallowed down the lump in his throat and tried not to look too hard at anything in particular.

Worse though than his anxiety for the town being crowded or busy or loud, were his anxieties about leaving the caravan.

*Leaving Coff.*

The thought of it made him ill.

He'd never had a partner he'd cared for so much before. Someone he loved so deeply— In the short time he'd known Coff, the man had become one of his closet friends and....

And....

And what if he *forgot* about Coff?! His memory was bad enough!

What if he was left behind in this crowded, terrifying town, and he forgot about the man he loved?

He couldn't bear the thought.

'Hey. You alright?' the voice spoke from his left, and Ka'harja whirled around in surprise to meet Koko's eye. 'You look like you're about to be sick.'

'I...' Ka'harja hesitated. Then averted his gaze. 'I'm just nervous about how big this town is. It's... basically a city.'

'Hm, you're not wrong about that,' Koko gave a nod of agreement. 'A better trade route or two and they might count it as one. It's population is *just* on the cusp of what the Empire considers a city, so....'

Ka'harja averted his gaze as Koko slowly trailed off.

For a moment they walked in quiet. Not uttering a sound between them as the caravan wheels bumped and jostled loudly and playful laughter floated through the air from the men walking up ahead.

Then, Koko sighed.

'Ka'harja,' her serious tone was tinged with concern. 'Are you okay? Tell me the

truth.'

'I'm tired,' Ka'harja answered.

'Is that all?' she asked, giving Ka'harja a knowing look. It was clear she knew what was really upsetting the man, and it made his stomach churn.

'Coff...' Ka'harja began. 'Coff told Baku, didn't he? About how we're.... How I'm going to.... While Coff has to....'

'Yes,' Koko confirmed, quietly. 'And Baku told me.'

'Mm...' Ka'harja couldn't meet Koko's eye as he rubbed his arm and swallowed.

They really were going to have to say goodbye, weren't they?

Ka'harja blinked back the forming tears from his eyes and tried to swallow down the sob that was threatening to escape him.

And Koko sighed again; a soft, sympathetic noise that was rare to hear from her.

'It's hard,' she said. 'I know. But you'll both be okay.'

'I... yeah,' Ka'harja let out a long, long breath as he found himself almost believing her. 'Yeah. I... yeah.'

'Yeah,' Koko echoed. Then she motioned ahead. 'We're almost there.... Come on. I know it's hard, but you'll regret it if you don't spend time with him now.'

She was right. And Ka'harja knew she was right. So he didn't argue as she pet him on the side of the leg and led him towards Coff's caravan.

She leapt up onto its step as it was still moving, effortlessly grabbing the edge of the doorframe to balance herself, and then turned to offer Ka'harja her hand.

But he simply shook his head at her.

There was no way he'd be able to get onto the step without slipping. And if he slipped then, knowing his luck, he would probably end up under the caravan's wheel!

'C'mon,' she beckoned him with a flick of her fluffy ear. 'You'll be fine.'

'I...' Ka'harja shook his head again. 'No. I'll... die.'

'Oh, don't be so dramatic!'

'I'll *die!*'

'Ka'harja.'

'I will! I'll miss the step, and I'll fall, and I'll be run over, and I'll die!'

Another sigh escaped Koko, though this one wasn't sympathetic. 'You know, you're so tall that sometimes I forget you're still just a kid,' she commented before turning and, without knocking or waiting for Ka'harja's offended squawk, made her way into Coff's home.

Just a kid?

*Just a kid?!*

Eighteen wasn't "just a kid," it was *adult!*

He was an *adult!*

He—

He bit his lip as he realised the way he was offended by the comment was extremely childish, and hated that he had proven her point. Even if it *was* only to himself and she hadn't heard the stupid thoughts in his head.

Ka'harja managed to chase the offended look off his face right as Coff appeared at

the door.

And it was just as well, as Coff looked depressed enough that an upset look from Ka'harja might have dealt the killing blow....

'Hey,' Ka'harja mumbled, feeling his heart both drop to his knees and give a flutter.

'H-H-Hey,' Coff managed, slowly lowering himself so he could sit on the top step.

'Hey...' Ka'harja repeated, unsure what else to say.

'H... Hey,' Coff echoed.

'Goddess in the High World,' Koko gave a scoff as she sat, cross-legged, behind Coff.

'I'm sure the two of you have *something* more to say to each other than just "hey"!'

Ka'harja licked his lips, barely noticing as the caravan slowed to a stop and Sken began loudly ordering people around. 'Hm....'

'Uh...' Coff blushed and looked away.

'I, um...' Ka'harja cleared his throat. 'I'm really gonna miss you.'

'Y-Yeah,' Coff's voice was barely a whisper. '*I-I'm going to... miss you t-too.*'

'I don't want you to leave,' Ka'harja admitted, feeling his heart squeeze tight in grief. 'I mean.... I know that you *have* to go. But I just.... I really wish you could stay with us.'

'I-I d-do t-too,' Coff managed. 'B-But I....'

The two trailed into silence, then, that was only broken by another of Koko's long sighs.

'You know, boys, you— Oh!' Koko sat up straighter, her eyes widening as she raised a hand. 'Distro!'

Ka'harja whirled around to see his mother climbing out of Denni's caravan. She was followed by her felinic friends, who were laughing loudly— And the felinics were followed by Dena, who looked tired enough to collapse.

Ka'harja flicked his ear, turning it to his family so he could listen in on their conversation as they approached, and heard them talking about moving on to continue their mail route.

'You're leaving already?' Ka'harja blurted, loud enough to elicit a cackle from his mother and a comment about eavesdropping from his aunt. 'I thought you'd at least stay the night?'

'Nah, bein' in a crowded town like this is just t'temptin'!' Tayal said, waving a dismissive hand in front of his nose like he was wafting away a bad smell. 'T'much t'steal! Don't want t'get 'rrested, aye?'

'Yeah, w'do better out in th'wilderness,' Werani confirmed, pecking a kiss on the top of Ka'harja's head. 'Now. Promise me yer'll keep up contact with that bloke of yer's, y'hear? Y'look good together. Don't let th'distance ruin ya.'

Ka'harja blushed as his uncle motioned to Coff and winked. 'I uh... won't.'

'Thatta boy!' Denni teased, ruffling Ka'harja's hair. 'We'll see ya in six months then, 'right? Love ya, kiddo.'

'Love you too, Auntie,' Ka'harja managed, and something in his chest loosened, just a little bit, as Denni gave him a tight hug and kiss on the cheek. 'See you... in six months.'

*He'd done this before.*

He let out a breath as he hugged each of his uncles in turn.

He'd done this many, *many* times before.

He'd said goodbye to people he loved— And they'd come back every time. And they'd still all loved each other every time. Distance had never stopped their love.

Maybe Coff having to leave wouldn't be as bad as he'd thought....

'See ya, Sweetheart!'

'Oi, tell little Lyzik we'll see 'er round!'

'Will do,' Ka'harja couldn't help but smile as he waved to the felinics.

He watched as they clambered back into their caravan, Denni taking her spot at the front, and started their horses moving again.

And then, like that, they were gone.

Distro let out a long sigh.

'Mum?'

'I miss them already,' she said.

'I don't,' Dena retorted, her voice flat. 'They were too loud. I didn't like them.'

Ka'harja rolled his eyes; Dena didn't like *anyone!*

He didn't say his thoughts out loud, though, as his mother seemed to think Dena's disgust was humorous and pet her on the back.

'Oh come now, that's a load of crock,' Distro argued, a very large grin spreading over her face. 'You *loved* them!'

'I did *not!*' Dena scoffed, crossing all four of her arms and turning away. 'I don't make friends. I don't like people.'

'*That's for fucking sure,*' Ka'harja mumbled under his breath— Though he blushed when Dena twitched an ear and eyed him.

A snicker escaped from Koko, who quickly covered her mouth as Dena's gaze turned to her.

'Dena, honey,' Distro spoke gently as she rested a hand on the nurlak's shoulder. 'I know it's hard to let your guard down. But it's okay.'

Dena shrugged her off and started towards the edge of the caravan; where she took her daughters hand and began talking to her about something Ka'harja couldn't hear.

Distro let out a sigh as she watched them. 'Ka, Sweetheart? I'm going to head into town with Dena and Stars. We need to sort out our housing issue, and their need to to register for citizenships.'

'Do you need me to come?' Ka'harja felt the hair standing up on his arms as he cast a sideways glance to Coff. *He wasn't quite ready to say goodbye. Not just yet....*

Distro shook her head. 'No, no. The paperwork alone would bore you to death,' she said. 'You stay with Coff. Maybe go scope out some of the local sights for me; meet our new neighbours. Find someone we can maybe, *you know.*'

Ka'harja felt his lips twitch into a grin as his mother gave a flick of her ears and made a plucking motion with a hand.

*Pickpocket.*

'I could take him to the local tavern for dinner, if you'd like,' Koko offered from her place at Coff's door, and Ka'harja realised how lucky they were she hadn't understood his mother's subtle hand-motion. 'Coff? You should come too. Baku owes me dinner, so it'd be his shout.'

Coff's anxious look softened at the mention of his friend and he gave a nervous chuckle. 'Y-You'd m-make him p-pay for a-all-a-a-all of u-u-u—'

'Yeah, I would,' Koko snickered as she rose to her feet. 'Not that he wouldn't do it, anyway. Man's too friendly for his own good.... Come on. You too, *kiddo*.'

Ka'harja tried not to look offended as Koko gave him a shit-eating grin. Instead, he turned back to his mother and bent down to kiss her cheek. He was finally starting to get used to the scaly texture that was patched all over her skin. Though, it was still noticeable.

'Alright, Sweetheart,' Distro kissed him back and ruffled his hair. 'I'll be back before it gets dark. Meet me here?'

'Will do,' Ka'harja promised.

He shuffled, watching as Distro made her way back to Dena's side and gave the woman a brief hug. It was clear, even from the distance, that she was saying something reassuring. Though Dena didn't seem to be all that reassured as she pulled away from Distro and took her daughter's hand with a miserable-looking expression. And whatever Stars said, as she adjusted her grip on her baby, seemed to reassure the poor woman *even less*. But, still, she let herself be guided towards the nearby town and out of sight.

Despite her attitude, Ka'harja couldn't help but feel bad for her. He'd found it hard enough to adjust to life outside the Heck'ne when he was a child, and after all poor Dena had been through....

A gentle tap on his leg got his attention and he glanced down to find Coff at his side. He didn't utter a word, but the look on his face said everything.

*There was no point in standing here staring at the spot his mother had just been. Not when Coff needed him.*

'Hey,' he said, softly, as he bent down to peck a kiss on the man's lips. 'It's going to be alright.'

'I-I h-hope s...' Coff trailed off.

'We're going to be alright,' Ka'harja said, surprising himself with the certainty in his tone. 'I've done this before. With my aunt and my uncles. My grandfather. And now we're in a town that *actually* gets its mail delivered— We'll be fine. We can write. And... maybe you can visit?'

'Th-Th-Thanks th-the-the g-gods!' the tension in Coff's shoulders slacked and he gave a nod; a look of relief washing over him. 'I-I was w-worried th-that you w-wouldn't w-want t-to— T-To— To— Th-That w-w w-would— We would have to.... To... br-br-break....'

'Break up?' Ka'harja finished. 'Yeah, nah, I don't think we have to. I think we.... I think we can do it.'

A weak smile found Coff's lips, then, and he leant against Ka'harja's side.

Then, on his other side, he felt a light tap as Koko passed him.

'You two will be fine,' she reassured. 'Now, c'mon! Let's go find Baku! I'm starving.'

'R-Ri-Right!' Coff stammered, and hurried after Koko.

Ka'harja didn't know what else to do but follow suit.

## **Chapter End.**

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