

Chapter 32:
Jasfe 4th, Firthda
Year 10,053 AE
(A Table in the Corner; The Local Tavern)

It had been an hour or two since they had arrived at the tavern, and the evening sun was just starting to shine in orange through the large square windows that sat on the opposite side of the room. The tavern was one of the outer buildings of the town, with a perfect view of the almost-setting sun across the empty hilly fields. This meant that there was nothing to block the bright light from shining in and the walls, which were a soft white-painted plaster, seemed to glow.

The long shadows of the tavern's patrons cut through the harsh light, casting to the far side of the room and almost dancing with every movement they made. Even the most subtle of tail-flicks made the light seem like it was alive.

Ka'harja didn't like it.

It reminded him too much of the fire that had taken his home.

Hot and red and orange and flickering with malice as dark ash stung his eyes and nose and stabbed at his lungs....

He knew the smell was just because the cook had burnt someone's dinner earlier. But the lingering scent of smoke combined with the orange ambience of the room was starting to turn his stomach, and even the cheery conversation of the small group he was with wasn't enough to distract him from the horrible feeling that squeezed at his heart.

The only two who had seemed to notice he was under any sort of stress were Coff and Trat.

It's okay, Trat had mouthed as Coff rested his head on Ka'harja's side and looked up to him with sympathy.

Ka'harja tried really hard to believe him. But it was hard.

He tried to focus on the others at the table — Koko and Baku and Lif— but as the boys flicked peas at each other and Koko motioned to the barmaid for another drink, Ka'harja found their antics weren't very helpful at keeping him grounded.

'Did you *see* her?'

'I know!'

'The spitting image of Klict! Pale-skinned and everything!'

The loud conversation across the room caught Ka'harja's attention, and he felt Coff's hand rest gently on his as he swallowed and turned an ear to listen. He knew his anxieties were clear as his friends all went quiet and did the same.

'We sure she's not just, I dunno, half dassen?'

'With that snout?'

'Part secas, maybe? I hear deep-dwellers can look *real* strange!'

'I doubt it.'

'Nah, yeah, she's definitely a dragon-shifter!'

'She was headed to the town hall.'

'I wonder what she wants.'

'Do you think she's going to stick around?'

'Oh, I hope so! That'd be so exciting!'

'Yeah! A real dragon-shifter, in Kokako Boaka?!'

'Ah!'

A trembling breath escaped Ka'harja, and he averted his eyes as Koko leant in close.

'Ka'harja,' she said, softly. 'Just ignore them.'

'They're talking about Mum,' Ka'harja's voice quivered, and he had to swallow to stop it from breaking. 'She hates it when strangers talk about her.'

'I know,' Koko comforted. 'But there's not a lot you can do. People are probably going to talk about her a lot now, with her looking like she does. It's alright. They don't mean any harm. They're just curious.'

Ka'harja shrugged, downing the last of his drink. 'I think I need some time alone,' he admitted. 'And I— I promised Mum I'd meet her back at the caravans at sunset so... I might walk back on my own.'

'A-A-Are y-you s-s-sure?' Coff asked as he squeezed Ka'harja's arm. 'I c-c-c-c-can — I can c-come w-with you?'

Ka'harja almost shook his head. But at the last moment he changed his mind, instead biting his lip and looking pathetic and miserable.

He still wasn't ready to say goodbye to Coff.

'I think walking back with Coff is best,' decided Koko.

'Yeah, you've had a lot to drink,' Baku added.

'Best not to be *completely* alone, when you're feeling out of your head,' Trat agreed.

'Mm,' Lif gave a nod and cast Trat a knowing look, though he didn't say anything.

Ka'harja knew he couldn't argue. So he pecked a kiss on Coff's lips and then rose to his feet.

And then he stumbled sideways as the room didn't stay upright, and barely managed to catch himself and avoid tripping on the barmaid.

'Oh, Goddess— You alright there, mate?' Trat was on his own feet, now, helping Ka'harja steady himself. 'Get your bearings....'

'I've... whoa,' Ka'harja blinked, dumbly, as the room came back into focus. 'I think I've had enough to drink.'

'You *think*?' Baku gave a humoured snort— And then a short grunt of pain as Koko punched him in the side. 'Aw c'mon. I was being playful!'

'That's not what he needs right now,' Koko scolded. 'Leave him be.'

'Right,' Baku gave a chuckle and cast a warm grin to Ka'harja; who tried his best to smile back. 'You stay safe. And look after Coff for me! Bring him back in one piece—'

Another punch met Baku's side and he cut off.

'You boys better go,' Koko said as she gently folded her arms. 'Before it gets dark.'

'R-R-Right,' Coff acknowledged as he took Ka'harja's hand and gave it a gentle tug. 'W-W-We sh-should.'

'Yeah...' Ka'harja replied. 'See you guys... later? Probably. Hopefully?'

'We won't leave without saying a proper goodbye, don't you worry,' Koko

reassured, then flicked her hand dismissively. 'Go on, get out of here before you forget how to walk!'

'Oh... I don't want to do that,' Ka'harja felt a chuckle escape him as he turned and let Coff lead him out of the tavern.

As soon as he was on the streets, out of the dancing orange shadows and stuffy crowded room, his head felt clearer. A deep breath of cool fresh air stopped his legs feeling like jelly, and everything seemed a lot less terrible.

He felt Coff squeeze his hand and squeezed back. And then the pair started for the caravans.

They weaved through the crowded streets, the path in front of Ka'harja clearing as the foxen people all gazed up at him curiously and stepped back to let him pass.

Against all his natural instincts to look away and ignore everyone forever, Ka'harja managed to mumble his thank yous and give many of the townsfolk polite waves.

He figured if this was his new home, it would be best to start things out on good terms....

Still, he was relieved when they made it out of town and back to camp.

'I-I-It l-looks like D-Distro's n-not-not-not-not—' Coff cut off with a deep breath, before speaking slowly. 'Your mother isn't h-here, yet.'

Ka'harja nodded his agreement. The only people he could see in camp right now were Sken, Annanyn, and Coborn.

It looked like Sken had just returned from town, as she gave both girls a small box of food each (some sort of takeaway, Ka'harja assumed) and left them to talk by the campfire.

She made her way past several caravans, kicking away sticks and rocks as she did to clear the area, and then spied Ka'harja and Coff watching her and gave them a friendly wave.

Ka'harja waved back, and he and Coff began towards her.

'I can't believe those idiots just up and left without a word!' Sken exclaimed as she motioned to the spot Denni's caravan had been when they'd first arrived. 'A month travelling together and they didn't even say goodbye!'

Ka'harja couldn't help but laugh. Even if it sounded nervous. 'They, uh. They asked me to say it for them,' he admitted. 'They didn't want to spend too long in town.'

'Ugh, somehow that's even *worse*,' Sken put her hands on her hips and playfully rolled her eyes. 'They've known me since I was a kid; you'd think they'd have the decency to look me in the eye before running off with my stock of silverware! I had someone actually interested in buying it, too!'

'They... took your stock?' Ka'harja felt himself blush as Sken nodded. 'Sorry about them. I'll... uh... I'll talk to them when I see them next?'

'Oh, don't even bother!' Sken gave a heavy sigh as she flicked her fin out of her face and waved a hand. 'It wasn't like I was expecting anything less from those idiots! I'll just run them off the road next time we cross paths and take *their* things! See how they like it.'

It was funny, Ka'harja thought, but he wasn't sure if it was appropriate to laugh. Especially when he felt Coff's grip on his arm tighten.

Instead, he just swayed in place for a moment; an action which made Sken narrow her eyes curiously.

‘Have you been drinking?’ she asked.

Ka’harja pinched two fingers together. ‘Just a little bit.’

‘Ah,’ her shoulders slacked, then, and she gave the boys a sympathetic look. ‘I don’t blame you.’

‘I-It’s been... a l-long d-day...’ Coff admitted. Then, his attention was drawn to something behind Sken and he pointed; causing both Sken and Ka’harja to look over.

It was Felelor and Naranako, looking... exhausted.

Sken gave them a wave and motioned to the campfire; and they all made their way over to sit with Coborn and Annanyn to talk.

‘You look as exhausted as I feel,’ Ka’harja said as he flopped down next to Naranako.

‘I feel as exhausted as you look,’ Naranako replied with a tired chuckle. Then he reached up and brushed Ka’harja’s fringe from his face. ‘Goddess, you have *such* beautiful eyes, you know—’

‘Don’t be weird, Naranako,’ Felelor warned.

‘I’m *not!*’ Naranako gave a half-offended scoff. ‘I was just going to say it’s a shame I never got to dress him up, that’s all!’

Coborn giggled into her dinner, though she quickly turned to Annanyn when the boys eyed her, as if she was trying to pretend the secas had something funny.

Felelor shook his head at her, though his expression was soft and humoured. Then he turned to Sken and gave her a tired-but-warm smile. ‘So, Naranako and I have been talking....’

‘Mhm?’ Sken gave an attentive hum.

Ka’harja noticed, then, that Naranako had begun to anxiously play with his nails; picking at their coloured polish as he flicked back his ears and chewed the lipstick off his bottom lip.

‘We’ve been working with you for a few years, now,’ Felelor continued. ‘And while we’ve really enjoyed it, we agree that we should move on.’

‘Move on?’ Sken’s eyes widened, and she looked taken aback as she flicked her tail. ‘You’re quitting?’

‘Yes,’ Felelor replied sadly as Naranako averted his gaze. ‘It’s too stressful travelling the way we do. It’s really put a strain on us. Especially lately.’

‘Yes, I’ve... noticed the fights,’ Sken sighed. ‘I understand. Though I’m sad to hear you’re leaving. Are you staying here in town, or...?’

‘We’re thinking of heading back to Ryala,’ Felelor told her.

Ka’harja’s ears twitched at the city’s name. It was very, *very* familiar....

‘We still own the house,’ continued Felelor. ‘It’d be nice if we could travel there with you.’

‘One last trip together,’ Naranako mumbled.

Sken’s face softened into a tired smile. ‘Of course we can—’

‘My grandfather lives in Ryala,’ Ka’harja blurted as he realised where he’d heard the address before. He felt Coff press tighter against his side as he shrugged. ‘Maybe you

know him?’

‘Uh...’ Felelor’s brow furrowed. ‘Maybe? What’s his name?’

‘Rorlbar,’ Ka’harja answered.

‘Hah! That’s the same name as the king!’ Annanyn gave a laugh. ‘Coborn’s met *that* Rorlbar.’

‘Well... no— Kind of?’ Coborn looked to her feet. ‘We never spoke. I just... saw him a few times during my apprenticeship. Then he fired me.’

‘Ah...’ Ka’harja folded down his ears and glanced down at Coff. *That was right.* Coborn and Coff’s mother had worked together in the royal kitchens.... ‘I guess it’s a common name.’

‘N-No, n-not r-r-r-really,’ Coff answered. ‘I-It’s... con-considered o-old f-f-f-fash-sh-shioned.’

‘Yeah, I haven’t met anyone with that name before,’ Felelor confirmed. ‘It was already old-fashioned when *I* was born, so....’

Slowly, the group trailed into awkward silence.

Then, after a long moment, Coborn gave a short, sharp giggle and covered her mouth.

‘What are you laughing about now?’ Felelor scoffed.

‘Can you *imagine* if Ka’harja was royalty?’ she laughed into her hand. ‘I couldn’t!’

‘*Hey!*’ Ka’harja whined. Then he snickered. ‘Well, it *is* my *grandfather!* He’s old fashioned— I guess he’s going to have an old fashioned name.’

Sken just shook her head, then put a hand on Felelor’s shoulder. ‘You won’t mind if we visit, will you?’

‘Of *course* not!’ Naranako answered for his uncle. ‘We *love* you! We just don’t love being on the road all the time. It’d be fantastic if you could visit!’

‘I’ll have to make sure we do,’ Sken replied with a shark-tooth grin.

‘I-I-I’d l-like that t-t-too,’ Coff managed. ‘I could— I could s-see my, uh— I could s-see my f-family a-a-again.’

Coborn gasped. ‘Oh! Yes! *Please!* I would *love* to see Kasta again!’

‘Who?’ Ka’harja cocked his head.

‘M-My m-moth-mother,’ Coff explained with a grin. ‘I-I-I did t-tell you ab-about her b-b-before.’

‘Ah, yeah, I don’t think much stuck,’ Ka’harja felt himself blush.

‘T-That’s okay,’ Coff reassured. Then his gaze moved from Ka’harja’s as Felelor pet Sken enthusiastically on the back.

‘And besides, it’s not like we ever did any good protecting you against thieves!’ he said in a joking tone. ‘So you won’t be losing much without us!’

‘Oh, don’t talk like that!’ Annanyn gasped. ‘You did a *great* job!’

‘I beg to differ!’ Felelor’s tail gave a humoured wag. ‘Every damn year. That stupid clearing in Okatako! Never could catch that thief.’

‘The only reason you never caught us was because we used invisibility potions!’ Ka’harja replied with a laugh and dismissive wave of his hand. ‘You never saw us coming! We just whooshed in and out and you never even knew it!’

Ka’harja gave another laugh. Then he stopped. Everyone had gone weirdly quiet....

And they were all staring at him.

Why was everyone staring at him?

'By the Goddess,' Felelor muttered, a look of realisation washing over him. 'It was *you!*'

'Oh fuck—' panic shot through Ka'harja and in an instant he felt fifty times more sober.

He leapt to his feet, almost knocking poor Coff off his seat as he stumbled two steps and then was tripped by Sken's tail wrapping around his ankle.

'You little shit!' Sken sucked in a sniff-like breath through her gills. Then, she smiled and *tsked* loudly. 'I should have realised you were a thief the moment you said Denni was your aunt.'

Ka'harja rolled over in the long grass, flattening a circle around him as he clumsily turned to Sken and bit his lip.

'Why didn't you tell me sooner?' she asked as she stood. 'You *had* to know we would have found out eventually, right? Our route takes us past your old house— You didn't think we'd notice not being robbed next year, and then wouldn't put two and two together?'

'Well.... It's a hard thing to bring up,' Ka'harja admitted.

Coborn gave another short, sharp giggle, which she muffled by stuffing her fist into her mouth.

'True,' Sken chuckled, petting Ka'harja on the back and helping him to his feet. 'Listen, Ka'harja. I like you. And I like your mother. You're good people.... But oh, *Scara*, you like to push my buttons, don't you?'

Ka'harja couldn't help but grin, even if it was an anxious one. 'It's a skill,' he joked.

Sken gave him a friendly pat on the shoulder and shoved him back towards his seat.

He took his place next to Coff and looked around the group.

It was very, very awkward. Nobody looked impressed; Annanyyn was shaking her head, Naranako was wringing his hands, Felelor was glaring, and Coborn had turned all the way around to try and muffle her giggles.... Though she kept glancing back and snickering.

It made Ka'harja almost scared to look to Coff, though he knew he *had* to.... So, hesitantly, he met the man's eye.

Neither of them said anything.

They just stared at each other for a long, agonising moment, and Ka'harja could only *imagine* what Coff was thinking—

Did he think Ka'harja had been lying to him?

Was he mad that Ka'harja was a thief?

Was he mad that Ka'harja had stolen from the caravan?

Oh, eighth child! Coff wanted to break up with him, didn't he?!

After all that talk of being long-distance, *this* was what was ending them—

Coff burst into a fit of laughter and collapsed face-first into Ka'harja's side.

Then, triggered by Coff's outburst, Coborn let out a *shriek* of joy and fell backwards off the log she sat on.

'Coborn!' Annanyn exclaimed as she tried to catch the woman— But she was too slow, and Coborn hit the ground with a dull *thump!* that echoed over Coff's muffled laughter.

'I'm sorry! I'm sorry!' Coborn managed, sounding barely able to breathe. 'Your *face!* Your *face*, Ka'harja! You looked like you thought he was about to *kill* you! Oh, Goddess! I'm sorry— I can't— I *can't!*'

Another snicker joined the chorus as Naranako put a hand over his mouth— And then Sken let out one of her loud screeching cackles through her gills and looked away. And Ka'harja saw Annanyn bite her lip then, as she was clearly trying not to giggle, herself.

Even Felelor's lips twitched, almost breaking into a grin as he crossed his arms and tried to keep his face expressionless. 'You're an idiot,' he said, humoured.

Ka'harja felt his cheeks burning as he chuckled. 'Heh, yeah...'

'Oh, no, you're *not* an idiot!' said Naranako, brushing his hand over Ka'harja's in a comforting way. 'You're just... *quirky!*'

'No, I'm pretty sure he's stupid!' Felelor argued, finally letting himself smile.

'*Psh!*' Naranako gave a dismissive scoff and batted at his uncle. 'Don't you listen to him, Ka'harja! He just doesn't understand men like us.'

Felelor gave a smug shrug. 'Oh *no*,' he said, his voice full of playful sarcasm. 'I have trouble understanding stupid men. However shall I live with myself.'

'Oh, leave them alone,' Sken teased, giving Felelor a friendly shove with her hip. 'Especially poor Ka'harja. He's barely sober.'

'I only drunk a little bit,' Ka'harja defended.

'Enough to loosen your tongue,' Sken retorted; much to Coborn's humour.

Ka'harja couldn't argue with that. So he didn't. Instead, he turned to Naranako as the man began to play with his hair.

'Naranako, stop *touching* people,' Felelor snorted.

'Oh, Coff, I am so jealous of you!' Naranako gave a sigh as he completely ignored his uncle in favour of flicking the healer's nose. 'I can't believe you got a boyfriend before me — Ah! And you weren't even *looking!* That's the rub, isn't it?'

Felelor gave an annoyed sigh and rolled his eyes. 'He's not even your type, Naranako.'

'Oh, shush, I can still be jealous!' Naranako returned the eye roll. Then, he grinned and took Ka'harja by the cheeks. 'Oh, you beautiful thing! You *have* to let me do your makeup at least *once* before you go! Please? Your face is such a nice shape, I *need* to play with it!'

'Stop touching him, Naranako,' Felelor warned.

'I don't mind,' Ka'harja admitted; surprising himself with his honesty. Usually he couldn't *stand* people touching him.... But he was getting used to the caravaners, now, and it didn't seem like such a big deal anymore. 'I mean. If... Coff doesn't mind.'

'N-N-Naranako...' Coff gave the man a look, and Ka'harja couldn't tell if it was humoured, annoyed, or sympathetic. 'H-He's harmless.'

'I *am!*' Naranako agreed.

'Yeah. That's why you're so shit at your job.'

‘Shut *up*, Felelor!’

Ka’harja saw, out of the corner of his eye, Annanyn take Coborn under her arm and lead her away.... Probably so she could finally stop laughing and *breathe*, Ka’harja thought.

Then, suddenly, Naranako’s makeup was out of his bag; strewn across the grass as he flicked through his palettes for something to match Ka’harja’s skin tone.

‘What lipstick do you like better?’ Naranako asked as he held up two small tubes. ‘Frost or rose?’

‘Uh...’ Ka’harja’s eyes narrowed in confusion. ‘The... red... one?’

‘Okay, hold still, beautiful!’

Ka’harja did as he was told and held still as Naranako began decorating his face. Despite the laughter that escaped from his companions, he found himself relaxing.... Or, perhaps it was *because* of the laughter he was able to relax.

These people cared about him. Genuinely. Even when he’d been an idiot and caused them problems, they still cared.

It felt good.... Almost like family.

‘Hah!’ Felelor gave a bark-like laugh as Naranako finished applying Ka’harja’s makeup. ‘So you *do* know how to use a *reasonable* amount of makeup?’

‘How I look is a choice,’ Naranako said, packing away all but a tube of bright pink eyeliner— Which he proceeded to apply to himself. ‘My body is a canvas! You wouldn’t tell an artist not to experiment with pastels, would you?’

‘I would if their paintings turned out like your face does,’ Felelor snorted. Then, his gaze fell towards town. ‘Ah. Ka’harja, your mother’s back.’

Ka’harja stood, turning so he could wave to his mother— And was met with Stars leaping onto him at full speed; her arms thrown around him as he stumbled backwards.

Sken caught him, rightening him before he could fall, and helped him peel Stars off his front.

‘Stars, give him some warning!’ she scolded through her humour. ‘You almost took us *both* out!’

‘Sorry! I’m sorry! Oh, gighi!’ Stars bounced herself in a circle, clapping all of her hands together as she spun in a frantic excitement. ‘Ka’harja! The most mip thing has just happened! The most amazing and mip thing! Oh, I am so excited! I have to be bahi, because I cannot contain how mip I feel! Ka’harja! I have a second name! A second one! Just like you! Beesa! Beesa is my name! Stars Beesa! Kekik said it was her name from a long long time ago, before she lived in Heck’ne! Which means it’s my name, too! That’s what they wrote when they made me a person in the books they keep! I am Stars Beesa, born in ten-thousand, thirty-three! And I— I—’ she danced in another circle before literally leaping for joy. ‘I’m going to be an Empire Citizen! They said I could be! Because my kekik was! And all I have to do is show them I can live here and not cause problems! As long as I’m mip behaved I can stay! I can be mip behaved! I can be *very* mip behaved! Yes! I can! The *most* mip!’

‘Hey! I’m happy for you!’ Ka’harja beamed as Stars spun away and called out for Annanyn. He shook his head playfully as she vanished behind one of the caravans, and then turned to his mother. ‘So. How did it go?’

‘We have a house,’ Distro said, holding up a rolled-up piece of paper. ‘Courtesy of Empire Disaster Relief.’

‘Oh, I remember them!’ Ka’harja couldn’t believe he did— But he *did!* ‘They were the ones who notarised my adoption papers!’

‘Yeah!’ Distro grinned, her teeth *clanking* together as she did. ‘It’s not a very big house —there aren’t many unoccupied buildings here, with how quickly the town has been growing— but it’ll do us. Won’t it, Dena?’

Dena, who had until now been busy with Little Demon, side-eyed Distro and shrugged. ‘A roof is a roof. I’m just grateful I won’t be outside again.’

‘Come on, Sweetheart!’ Distro’s voice was full of joy as she took Ka’harja by the hand and gave it a loving squeeze. ‘Come see it!’

Chapter End.

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