

Chapter 33:
Jasfe 4th, Firthda
Year 10,053 AE
(The Main Room; Home)

It was perfect.

Ka'harja thought he might cry.

Everything about their new home was perfect.

The main room wasn't as big as the one in their old house but the white-plaster walls were clean and the hardwood floors were smooth and even. The curtainless windows let in filtered light through their frosted glass, and the archway under the staircase opened into a small stone-lined kitchen that already had several pots sitting in a neat pile by the stove.

Ka'harja could already picture it.

A table by the window.

A shelf by the stairs.

The Eight Star tapestry hung on the far wall by the back door.

He had to bite his bottom lip to stop it from trembling.... Though the snuffle he made as tears came to his eyes was harder to hide.

He reached up a hand, gently brushing the roof with his fingers. There was a little under a foot of space between his head and the wooden support beams that held up the floor above, and the soulstone chandelier centrepiece hung down to just where he would be able to peck a kiss on its decorative metal arms.

He didn't mind that he'd had to duck under the doorway to get inside.

His new home was perfect.

'Wow,' Sken breathed from behind Ka'harja as she followed him into the house. 'This is nice, isn't it?'

'Yeah,' Ka'harja answered, his voice a little bit higher-pitched than he could have liked it as he swallowed back a happy sob.

Sken's hand was gently placed on his shoulder, though she didn't say anything else as she glanced back at Annanyn, Coborn, and Coff as they made their way inside.

Coff stood by Ka'harja's side as Annanyn and Coborn took up next to Stars; who was running her hand along the hearth of the fireplace with a mesmerised look in her eyes. A gentle explanation, just a little too quiet for Ka'harja to hear properly, was started.

And then his mother called his name.

'Ka, Sweetheart, come look at *this!*' she beckoned, a large grin on her face as made her way to the door at the bottom of the stairs. 'You'll love it!'

Ka'harja followed her, feeling Sken's hand slip from his shoulder as he did, and found himself inside a small stone bathroom.

It was... different to the one in their old house. There was more than just a bath and shelves— There was a sink. And a toilet; which his mother made her way over to so she could yank at a lever on its side.

It made a loud *FLOOSHing* noise that was followed by a hollow gurgle and the sound of Ka'harja bursting into tears.

He felt incredibly stupid as he dropped to the floor and sat with his face in his hands, sobbing loud enough to bring the others into the bathroom, but he couldn't stop himself from crying. No matter how hard he tried.

His mother's hands took his wrists and, gently, she pecked a kiss into the top of his head. 'Alright,' she mumbled into his hair, a note of humour in her voice. 'I'll have them remove the indoor plumbing, shall I?'

The laugh that came out of Ka'harja could only be described as "wet," and it made him blush as he felt Coff pet the top of his head in a comforting way.

Then, there was a knock at the door and everyone turned; their ears and fins all flicking attentively.

'That's probably Felelor and the others,' Sken said, and Ka'harja was reminded that she'd sent her two guards to retrieve the rest of her workers. 'Do you want me to let them in?'

'Nah, pretend we're not home!' Distro joked. Then she gave Ka'harja another kiss and stepped around him, making for the door as another knock sounded.

Ka'harja got to his feet and stepped into the main room as she made it to the door and playfully knocked back.

Then, after a long and seemingly confused pause, an unfamiliar voice spoke out. 'Hello?'

'Oh, shit—' Distro yanked open the door. 'I'm so sorry, I thought you were someone else!'

She was met by a foxen man who, after a brief moment of seeming stunned, offered Distro his hand. 'My name is Metita Karta. I'm with the E.D.R? I'm here to deliver living essentials to the Nigelle-Beesa household.'

'Yes, that's us,' Distro confirmed, stepping aside and motioning Metita inside. Then, she leant out the door and waved. 'Felelor! This one!'

Metita entered the house, gently drumming his fingers against his clipboard as he looked around. 'I was told there were *five* new residents?' he said, motioning to the group of people in the house. 'Who would that be?'

Sken's hand clapped loudly against Ka'harja's back, then, and she gave him a little push forward.

'Right. You're...?'

'Ka'harja,' Ka'harja answered, swallowing as the man scribbled a tick next to something on his clipboard. 'Uh and that's... Distro,' he motioned to his mother. Then, when Metita ticked again, he pointed to Dena and then Stars. 'And Dena. And Stars.'

'And "Demon" is the infant,' Metita acknowledged with a nod. 'Good, good. Everyone is accounted for...' the man turned to eye the group that was now entering the crowded house. 'And you others aren't looking to enter the program?'

'Oh no, no!' Annany raised her hands and waved them in a short and dismissive motion. 'We're not staying!'

'We're just dropping them off,' Sken confirmed. 'We'll be moving on tomorrow.'

Ka'harja felt his heart squeeze as Coff took his hand.

Tomorrow....

'Good, good,' Metita made another note. Then, he motioned to Ka'harja with his pen. 'Head of the household?'

'Great Star, *no!*' Ka'harja squeaked. 'Why would you think that I'd be...?'

'You spoke up,' Metita said, simply. Then, he scanned his eyes over Dena. Then Stars.... Then he turned to Distro and motioned with his pen again. 'Head of the household?'

'I suppose so,' Distro gave a shrug.

'Right; step out with me and we'll discuss your needs,' Metita said, flicking his pen to point to the door. 'I have a cart outside with essentials, and once we know what you need we can bring it in.'

'Sounds... *good*,' it was more of a strangled sigh, than an agreement, and Distro's hesitancy was clear. She hated asking for help like this— That much was clear as her ears drooped and she glanced to Metita's clipboard with a tired look.

And Metita responded with his own sigh; a sympathetic sound that was accompanied by his already-soft eyes softening more and his hand reaching out to gently brush Distro's shoulder. 'Asking for help to get back on your feet doesn't make you any less independent,' he tried.

'Ugh, it's not that. I don't know *what* is it,' Distro's brow furrowed, and she turned to the door. She called over her shoulder as she headed out, 'Sweetheart, why don't you go upstairs and check there's enough beds for us?'

'Uh, yeah!' Ka'harja called back. 'Sure!'

Coff's hand squeezed his again, and he squeezed back this time; letting the healer follow him as he made his way to and up the stairs.

He was met with a single room; a bedroom, which had a bed in each corner and window on each wall.

Ka'harja wasn't sure if he'd fit in any of the beds. They were, unlike the bed in his old house (which had come from Denni and so was feline-sized), foxen-made beds and only made to accommodate those slightly taller than the foxen average.... Not someone almost twice that tall.

Well... he was sure his mother wouldn't mind sharing, so he released Coff's hand and wordlessly made for one of the beds on the far side of the room; he moved it away from the wall before bracing his side against it and shoving it across to the bed opposite. He pressed them together, making sure there was no gap, and then laid down on it....

It was just shy of being long enough and his feet hung off the end—

'*Gighi*, Ka'harja! That's smart!' Stars' voice chirped from the stairs, and Ka'harja craned his neck to see her gently passing her baby to Coff so she could hurry to one of the other beds.

She shifted it, using the same motions Ka'harja had (though, perhaps she was a little clumsier as she mimicked him) until it was pressed up against the one he'd moved.

Then Stars clambered in next to Ka'harja, forcing him to shift against the wall so she could get comfortable without elbowing him, and settled down. 'These beds are soft!' she exclaimed as she snuggled down. 'Much softer than the bedroll Sken let me use! Though— There's not going to be enough beds to do this twice, is there? We're going to

have to share, aren't we?'

'I guess so,' Ka'harja gave an awkward chuckle as he pulled the pillows out from between him and the wall and threw them up to the new "head" of the bed. 'Until we can get something else made, at least—' he cut off as Stars rolled into him and gave him a tight hug, and he quickly glanced to Coff; dark, hot blush spreading over his cheeks in anxiety as Stars nuzzled into his chest. *Was Coff the jealous type?*

But Coff was laughing at them, as he made his way to the spare bed and lay Little Demon down comfortably. 'I-I-I'd be, uh.... I'd l-lying if I d-didn't say I-I'd— Say I'd shared a b-b-b-bed l-l-like-like that with-with C-C-Coborn and once or-or-or twice in Sn-Sn-Snowfall back h-home,' he said, his attention still half on Little Demon as he wiggled his fingers for the baby to swipe at. 'Sh-She w-would get s-so cold, and I-I'd wake up to-to her cl-cl-cling-cling-cling— *Clinging* to me for-for w-warmth.'

Ka'harja let out a breath, and let himself smile back as Stars pressed him against the wall and snuggled into him. *Coff understood.*

'Aw, ain't you so sweet?' Trat's teasing tone floated from the doorway, and Ka'harja gave the man a playful frown and flicked an ear at him. 'Distro's wondering why you didn't come back downstairs. Guess I'll go let her know you're being held up?'

'Yeah, uh— Tell her that uh... the beds are small,' Ka'harja managed, narrowly avoiding Stars' elbow as she rolled over to hurry after Trat back downstairs.

She paused at the first stair, then took a step back and looked over to Coff and her baby. 'Coff?' she asked. 'I almost forgot to ask you, which would have been very rude to forget. And I know you wouldn't be upset with me, but I still don't want to be rude just because you wouldn't be upset— Can you look after Little Demon? Please?'

'S-S-Sure,' Coff managed, giving a nod as he let Little Demon take hold of his thumb and chew on it. 'I-I'll look af-after h-him.'

And like that, Stars had vanished back downstairs.

Ka'harja heaved a sigh and laid flat on his back in the three-beds-turned-one so he could look at the roof.

It was tall and long, with the rafters on the sides that faced the neighbours sloping upwards toward the centre of the room, like two cards placed balancing against each other— And the walls on the street and back sides extended into a triangular shape to meet them.

The struts and beams were all visible, as was the thatching used to insulate and protect from the weather.

Ka'harja wondered how thick the thatching was woven; if he reached up and dug into the roof, how far could he stuff his arm before he reached the waterproofing and outer tiles?

He was half-tempted to do it. He might have, if Coff hadn't been watching him with those tired, beautiful eyes of his.

So instead of standing up and stuffing his arm into the roof, he shifted over slightly and pet the bed to invite Coff to lay beside him.

Coff hefted Little Demon into his arms and sat beside Ka'harja, who chuckled as the baby reached out and tried to grab his hair.

'He can't really *grab* things yet, can he?' said Ka'harja. 'Is that normal for his age?'

‘H-His gr-grip is... is a little w-weak,’ Coff acknowledged, clear concern in his voice. ‘Esp-Especially f-for a h-half d-dassen.... A-An-And h-he should.... He h-hasn’t b-been a-able t-to l-lift his he-head yet, either.’

‘Should he be able to?’

‘Y-Yes,’ Coff sighed. ‘A-At least a l-little b-bit. N-Nurlak c-can usually d-do it at t-two m-months, and d-dassens at o-one. I-I would have tho-thought-thought h-he would b-be f-faster than a— Than a re-re-regular nurlak, b-but.... Maybe.... M-Maybe i-it’s the m-milk. D-Dassen milk.... I-Is different to nu-nurlak milk.’

‘Ah, yeah.’

‘B-But th-that’s n-not e-even what has me-me-me-m-m— That’s not what has m-me most concerned.’

Ka’harja’s ears twitched, and he rolled into a sit. ‘What’s there to be concerned about?’

Instead of answering, Coff stood up; Little Demon bundled safely in his arms as he stepped out to the middle of the room.

‘Coff?’ Ka’harja repeated. ‘What’s there to be concerned about?’

But Coff didn’t seem to hear him. Instead, he had an intense look of focus. Like he would get when he was reading.

The healer examined the floor and, seemingly happy that it was clean, carefully placed Little Demon on his stomach before sitting in front of him.

‘C-Come on,’ Coff urged quietly as he moved his fingers in front of Little Demon in an enticing way. ‘L-Look u-up. Look a-a-at m-me.... C-Come on....’

It was clear that Little Demon was trying. But the baby just didn’t have the strength to lift his head.

And that was when Ka’harja noticed he could barely move his wings.

‘That’s not normal, is it?’ Ka’harja asked. ‘He should be able to move his wings more, like he’s moving his arms.’

Coff shook his head; then he nodded. ‘A-And his l-legs, t-too....’

‘Is it... something to be worried about?’ Ka’harja asked, his heart twisting at the thought of Little Demon being ill. It was true that he didn’t like spending time with the infant, and sometimes even avoided it, but... even though he was so small and annoying he was still a *person*. And Stars loved him so much.... ‘Is it bad?’

‘I-I-I don’t th-think so,’ again, Coff shook his head, and brought Little Demon into his lap. ‘I-I think he-he’s just behi-behind. M-My b-biggest con-con-concern is that h-he has a-a-a-a— Is that he has a growth disorder. L-Like Dena? W-With Stars’ father being her... h-her br-br... her br...’ he looked ill as he attempted to finish the sentence, and Ka’harja was relieved when he opted to reword himself. ‘His b-birthing c-circumstances m-mean he-he’s gen-genetically pr-predisposed to-to certain dis-disorders.’

‘Like being short?’

‘Y-Yes, dwarf-dwarfism i-is one. Th-Though he’s n-not showing any s-signs of th-that. Y-You can u-usually t-tell b-by now,’ said Coff. ‘He-He was p-pr-pretty s-sick, though. Wh-When St-Stars first br-bought him t-to m-me. H-He wasn’t even-even— He wasn’t even cr-crying pr-properly. I-I-I th-thought it was because— B-B-Because he was ha-half dassen, and th-they don’t m-make m-much noise. B-But now that he’s, uh.

Now that he's cr-crying louder I-I think it was-was his h-health. I-I-I g-get wor-wor-worri-i-i— I get worried about it s-sometimes. About *h-him*.... I'm ner-nervous about n-not being h-here for him.'

Ka'harja gave an understanding nod and slid out of bed so he could join Coff on the floor. He scooted across the room to his boyfriend an inch at a time in a way that was perhaps a little bit undignified and, ignoring Coff's halfhearted chuckling, placed an arm around him.

'I-I m-might h-have a l-l-look ar-arou— A look around t-town in the m-morning and-and s-see if I can f-find a g-good d-doctor for h-him,' Coff decided aloud; his voice still tinged with humour as he rested his head on Ka'harja's shoulder. 'G-Give them my n-notes. H-He's going t-to need re-regular check-check-checkups an-and I'd— I want to kn-know the doctor he sees is a g-good one.'

'I think Stars would appreciate that,' Ka'harja said; matching Coff's smile.

Then, his smile fell as Coff's own did, and he bit his lip as the man looked away.

'Coff? What's wrong?'

'Ka'harja, I.... I'm really.... I'm scared,' Coff admitted. 'A-About us. O-Our relationsh-ship. I'm so scared that we're not going to— Th-That we won't w-work long d-distance and— And... what if we can't s-so it? I can't afford to quit this job. M-My family n-needs me! And I— I don't want to break up. I love you so much I— It— I know it-it sounds st-st-stupid, but I... I don't th-think I-I'd su-sur-survive if we fell out of love....'

'We'll be okay,' Ka'harja promised.

'I... I d-don't know,' Coff wiped his eyes and sniffed. 'I j-just d-don't *know*.'

'No, hey. Don't cry!' Ka'harja exclaimed, grabbing Coff's face and planting a storm of tiny kisses over it. 'Don't cry! I love you! I love you so much! I want to try! I want to be with you. I do. I really, really do.'

'I— I kn-know,' Coff took a deep breath, stilling his shaky voice and adjusting his grip on the child in his arms as it reached up to touch his face. 'But I'm so scared th-that w-we are going t-to....'

'Whatever happens in the future will happen,' Ka'harja said, surprising himself with the confidence in his tone. 'For now, though, we're still together. Okay? We're still together. And we're *trying*. And we'll do our best to make it work.'

Coff looked unsure. So Ka'harja shifted, kneeling in front of the man and gently placing their foreheads together so their eyes locked.

'I love you,' he said, firmly. 'And if you need to work to support your family.... Let me help.'

Tears came to Coff's eyes as he took a disbelieving breath.

'I'll get a job here,' Ka'harja continued. 'Establish myself as an alchemist. Then once I've got good customers and I'm earning enough money, you can come live here with me. We'll open up a clinic together. Koko said the town's growing— They'll need more doctors. *Good* doctors. I'm sure we'll be able to make a living, and we can send money to your family.'

Coff gave a halfhearted laugh and, his gaze averting down to Little Demon, wiped his nose on his sleeve. 'I-I can't ask that of y-you.'

'You don't have to,' Ka'harja said, softly. 'I'm offering.'

'K... Ka'harja...'

'Please say yes,' Ka'harja leant even closer; pressing his forehead tighter against Coff's and feeling their noses brush as the man's eyes moved back to his. 'Please. Let me make something for us. Give me something to look forward to. To *work* for.... I've never had that, before.'

A weak smile twitched to Coff's lips; which he then pressed against Ka'harja's own. *They would be fine.*

Ka'harja knew it. Deep in his heart, he knew they would be alright.

So he kissed Coff back, tasting the man on his lips like a fried-spider treat, and let the moment be.

It was a moment he never wanted to let go of.... But then there was a pair of shrieks downstairs —one of excitement and humour, and the other of surprise and shock — followed by the sound of clanging pots and pans and Distro cackling and swearing, and Ka'harja could only *imagine* what trouble his mother was getting up to.

He felt his heart flutter as more laughter floated up the stairs and he rose to his feet.

It felt good to have friends.

He never would have thought it; he always thought he preferred to be alone, with just him and his mother and nobody else.... But hearing the laughter downstairs, hearing the people he loved —and who loved him back— cheer and whoop and chuckle... and knowing that, even if they were apart for a while, they would come together again and the love would still be there.... It made him feel more whole than he had ever felt before.

Like they had filled an empty space he had never noticed was even there.

'Come on,' Ka'harja felt a wide grin spread over his face as he offered Coff his hand. 'Let's go downstairs before Mum accidentally burns *this* house down, too!'

Chapter End.

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