



**The Runaways**  
**Don't Lose Hope #1**  
By C. Jade Wyton

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*Don't Lose Hope* is a fantasy series that I originally started when I was a young disabled child coping with the horrors of the world, and written as an escape from reality. Now, as an adult, I reshape the series using my new perspective and understanding of what I experienced. Because of this the story is very personal and, at times, often very intense. It is written with a target audience of one singular person: myself. However, over the years as I have shared my work many others have enjoyed it, and now I hope you will, too!

The series features bad language, erotic scenes, discussion of childhood traumas, and other material which might be considered offensive and/or upsetting. Please also note that sexual assault (and the survival of) is a heavily touched on subject in the books, with several of the characters being recovering victims of things such as CSA. I've done my best to handle these topics with respect and sensitivity but several scenes may be triggering to certain readers. Please take care of yourself if you intend to read the series!

For more information on content warnings, please see the website [demrefor.com/writing/dont-lose-hope](http://demrefor.com/writing/dont-lose-hope) or contact me directly.

*To my childhood self, who desperately needed to know it was going to be okay.*

*It was.*

# Prologue

## **The Wasteland's Edge; Heck'ne** **Lorane 8<sup>th</sup>, Year 10,044 AE**

The wasteland was worse than usual.

Filthy brown clouds coated the sky in thick layers that blocked out the sun, and the constant rainfall they produced had turned the usually-dusty wasteland into a giant mud puddle. Even the deep rock holes that lead into the planet —the ga'oa pits — were beginning to crumble at the edges.

The native Har'pies rumoured that peering into the pits was like looking into the depths of the forever-dark. They believed ga'oa were gateways to the dreaded Underfor; where rocks shone like stars and goblins devoured not only the body, but the soul.

Ka'harja had never really believed in star-shining rocks or goblins, but he knew about death. He'd seen low-ranking Har'pies thrown into the pits before. Sometimes there'd be echoes as they hit the cave's deep bottom. Other times, their cries would fade into silence, absorbed into the endless black. Even at his young age, Ka'harja knew it would be impossible to survive the fall. He didn't like the thought of going anywhere near the ga'oa, which seemed even more menacing now than before the six-day rain had started. Before the downpour the holes had been strong and stable, but now mud flowed into them like slow, filthy waterfalls and the edges crumbled at even the most gentle touch.

The ga'oa pits were terrifying; that's why Ka'harja had always tried to avoid them. Falling into the ga'oa was his biggest fear... but now he didn't have a choice. He was going to be thrown in.

There was nothing he could do to stop his parents as they dragged him through the mud towards the pit. They were going to kill him.

'Plea-th,' Ka'harja begged through tears. 'Plea-th don't! I'll do bet-der! I'll do bet-der!'

His mother struck him across the face. 'Shut up, you little disappointment!'

Blood trickled down Ka'harja's cheek where his mother's nails had left their mark. And he screamed in agony as his father grabbed him by the ear and yanked him sideways.

'You're an embarrassment,' his father spat as he threw Ka'harja at the hole. 'You're borne from the greatest warriors the troop has seen in generations, and yet you are the most pathetic excuse for a Har'py I've ever known!'

'I'm th-orry!' Ka'harja's tongue felt bigger than usual as his legs slid over the edge of the pit. The ground was soft and unstable but he managed to stop himself from falling.

'Did you hear that, Kay'oten? He's "*th-orry*"!' his father mocked, turning to the woman beside him. '*Th-orry* for being *uth-eleth*!'

'Shut up, Pert'ana!' Kay'oten hissed before turning and advancing on her son. 'You're a foxen, Ka'harja! You have no excuse to be so pathetic! Maybe— Maybe if I'd had you with Lah'kort I could understand —not that I'd ever let a *nurlak* touch me— but you are *our* son! A foxen! With a pure bloodline that's entangled itself for generations! It's shameful that you've inherited nothing of our family's strength. To you, and to our ancestors. Shameful and humiliating!'

Tears rolled down Ka'harja's cheeks as he struggled in the mud. He managed to crawl away from the hole, but his feet kept slipping out from underneath him as he tried to stand.

'What, can't get up?' his father hissed as Ka'harja tried to get his footing. 'That's just embarrassing! Come on, boy! You should at least put up a fight before you die. At least *try* to have some honour!'

The Har'pies watched their son flop in the mud with disgust.

'It should have been him who died,' Kay'oten hissed. 'Sai'karsa never would have humiliated herself like this. Do you hear that, Ka'harja? Your sister was more than you'll ever be! *It should have been you!*'

'It wa-then't my fault!' Ka'harja fought desperately for balance in the mud, sinking deeper with each attempt to stand. He inhaled sharply as his foot made contact with rock. The rock was solid but slippery; he managed to jam his foot into a hole and balanced himself. 'I tried!' he shouted through tears. 'I tried to th-ave her!'

Tears streaked lines through the mud on his face as Ka'harja faced his parents.

'*It wa-then't my fault!*' he repeated. 'Plea-th, ju-tht th-top....'

'Stop crying and face death like a Har'py—' his mother was cut off by her own surprised shout as the ground slid out from under her feet.

She stumbled dangerously close to the pit, but managed to catch her footing before she reached the edge. A look of embarrassment flashed across her face; which she hid with rage.

She let out an angry shout and lunged at her son, making a grab for his ear as she did.

Pain shot through Ka'harja's trapped leg as his mother slammed into him. There was a snap and a short spurt of blood sprayed upwards into his mother's face.

The Har'py screeched and stumbled back in shock. She collided with her partner, who slipped in the mud and fell backwards.

There was a loud *CRACK* as Ka'harja's father landed and the side of the ga'oa pit lurched under the sudden weight of the foxen man. It dragged him down with it as it fell, and the warrior's screams were cut short as a river of mud followed him.

Ka'harja felt his breath catch in his throat as he yanked his leg out of the hole.

He struggled to his feet, barely able to feel his own body past the heavy beating of his heart as he watched his mother collapse at the edge of the pit.

‘PERT’ANA!’ she shrieked, grabbing at her own scalp and scoring deep scratches into her face. ‘PERT’ANA! PERT’ANA!’

The Har’py began screaming her partner’s name over and over in a fit of grief, and Ka’harja didn’t wait for her to remember he existed. He saw his chance and began sprinting across the wasteland. He tried to ignore the agony in his leg and didn’t dare look down in fear of what he might see.

If he looked, it became real. And he didn’t want it to be real.

The rain fell heavier as he ran, obscuring his vision and chilling him to the bone. He could barely see an arm’s length ahead as he ran blindly through the downpour. He ran and ran— Until he collided with someone and fell backwards into the mud.

‘I-I’m th-orry!’ he stammered, raising his hands defensively. Fear shot through him in the form of a million dreadful questions. Who was it? What would they do to him? Would they take him back to his mother? Would they kill him themselves? ‘Plea-th don’t hurt me! I’m th-orry!’

The only response he got was a strange, raspy groan.

Slowly, Ka’harja dared to look up and saw he’d run into a girl only a few years older than himself; a nurlak who pushed herself up using her four thin arms, and then turned to look at him with a mournful gaze.

This girl was from his troop, he realised. She was the deformed daughter of his father’s most loyal follower. *Hakalika*, he’d heard her called. Hakalika in the head.

Crazy and hakalika and not good at thinking.

‘You’re Ka’harja. Yi,’ it wasn’t a question; but a statement.

She knew who he was, and Ka’harja knew he didn’t have to nod. But he did anyway. And just like she’d stated his name, he stated hers; ‘You’re Neg’an.’

‘Mhm. What happened to your leg?’ she asked hoarsely— This time, it *was* a question.

Reminded of his injury, Ka’harja glanced down. He nearly threw up when he saw a jagged chunk of bone poking out from his thigh, and the sight of the injury triggered a response in his brain. He began to wail in agony as the wound became real and he remembered what was happening.

Neg’an gripped him tight with three of her arms and covered his mouth with the fourth. She was stronger than she looked and although he struggled, Ka’harja couldn’t pull away from her. He trembled in her grip as she suppressed his wailing into a muffled sob. After he was quiet she released him and then, breathing heavily, she stood and offered him her hand.

She sighed when Ka’harja flinched away from her, her breath rasping strangely as she struggled to breathe. Her eyes seemed to look past Ka’harja instead of at him, and she swayed in place.

‘The sky is crying for you,’ she said, flicking her ears.

Ka’harja’s heart gave a jolt when she spoke, and he finally let her help him to his feet as he looked up at the thick blanket of clouds, trying to ignore the pain in his leg. Water splashed onto his face and stung his eyes, blurring his vision as he turned back to the girl.

‘Ith it?’ he managed. ‘I didn’t know the th-ky could cry for uth.’

Neg’an looked at him sadly. ‘I’m crying for you, too,’ she told him. ‘But you can’t see it because the sky’s tears have gotten too mixed up with mine. It’s a mup time, tonight. My heart felt so heavy when Sai’karsa died. So tiirl. And now my eyes are crying with the sky for you.’

Ka’harja tried to look for tears on her cheeks, but she was right: the rain had made her face too wet to see them. Instead his attention was drawn to her deformities and, slowly, he reached out and placed his hand on her forehead. He could feel the strange bumps where her second set of eyes should have been, as if they were still in her head, under her forever-closed lids.

‘You only ha-th two eye-th.... It look-th like you have a fok-then fa-th,’ he trembled as he tried to distract himself from his pain. ‘Ec-thept for your ear-th. They need fur.’

‘I like the way you talk,’ Neg’an rasped. ‘It’s always made me feel less alone.’

‘You *like* my voi-th?’ Ka’harja felt his jaw tense as tears welled in his eyes.

‘Kosson, my friend,’ she said with a cough. ‘I won’t tell anyone I saw you. You’ll be okay.’

‘Promi-th?’ his voice broke as he spoke. ‘Do you promi-th it will be okay?’

She nodded, slowly and deliberately, before opening her mouth to speak— But she coughed again instead, much more violently this time, and ended up on her knees as she gasped for breath.

‘Neg’an!’ a terrified voice called through the night. ‘Where are you?! Come home! Broja’kar! It’s too cold! Your throat will swell! Neg’an, come home now! Broja’kar now, Neg’an!’

The nurlak turned and twitched her pointed ears as the woman called to her. Then she stumbled to her feet, rasping a goodbye to Ka’harja as she disappeared into the thick rain.

Ka’harja watched her leave, shocked by her kindness. It was rare to find a Har’py as gentle as she had been, and it made him forgot himself for a moment as he felt strength flow through him.

He was going to be okay. Neg’an had promised it. She’d promised he would be okay.

And he.... He *believed* her.

‘KA’HARJA!’

Ka’harja tensed as his mother’s voice shrieked over the rain.

‘WHERE ARE YOU, KA’HARJA? I’LL KILL YOU! DO YOU HEAR ME? I *WILL* FIND YOU!’

All of Ka’harja’s fears came crashing back down on him and he found himself running. Despite his injured leg he ran faster than he ever had before. Faster than he thought he could. He ran until he couldn’t breathe and doubled over, collapsing into the mud and feeling the sting of infection start in his wound.

As he caught his breath he looked up and saw that he was only a short distance away from the edge of the wasteland; where the mud ended and grass began. So... he forced himself to keep moving, groaning in agony as he pushed himself to his feet and stumbled on. Every movement he made sent a new wave of pain through his body.

But he couldn't stop.

He wasn't sure how he'd made it this far. Everything was cold and sore and confusing. But he couldn't stop himself from moving forward. Even if he wanted to — even if he tried— he wasn't sure he'd be able to bring himself to collapse. Not now.

Painfully he stepped onto the grassy field and dared a glance back at the wasteland, giving a sigh of relief as he saw his footprints swallowed into the muddy ground.

His mother would never find him.

Knowing that was enough to keep the child staggering forward.

Squinting into the distance, he swore he could see a light. It may have been a fire from another troop. Or maybe it was the sun rising. He didn't know; he'd never been out of the wasteland before and everything looked different.

Absently the boy staggered towards the light. He didn't care what happened anymore. He was tired and he ached all over. He didn't care if the light was another Har'py troop; he could reason with them. And if he couldn't, at least they'd kill him quickly and end the hurting.

The light grew brighter and brighter until he found himself at a... strange sort of structure that he'd never seen before.

It was big and square with a slanted top. It's shape reminded him of the worn-down hovels his family used for shelter. Only it was larger. And it stood straighter.

Warm light poured out holes in its sides and Ka'harja found himself drawn to the strange building. He staggered against its wall and stood at his full height to peer into one of the holes.

He couldn't really understand what he was looking at. The ground inside was covered in strangely coloured objects. Some looked like they had liquid inside, while others didn't, and some were broken into smaller pieces with jagged edges that reminded him of sharp, too-long fingernails.

There must have been a hundred of them scattered about the building, all leading up to a rocky dent in the wall where a small fire crackled underneath a round black stone that steamed strangely.

Ka'harja sighed. He was cold and wet and longed for the warmth and dryness fire would bring.

Without thinking, he moved to climb into the hole, but couldn't. He wasn't sure what kind of magic had stopped him, but he'd banged his head against the air as if it were stone.

He raised a hand and touched the smudged mark that had been left on the solid air.

*What was it?*

He banged the air with his fist and it made a strange *thunk*, like a hollow log, but not quite the same.

So he banged it again, harder this time, and it shattered into a rain of tiny stones like the colourful ones inside.

Ka'harja pulled away as they tinkered to the ground and stared at his bleeding hand. They'd bitten him! The rocks had bitten him!

'Har'py shits!' a voice cut through the air. 'I've told y'all before to— You get—

Get out! Stop breaking my windows! I'll fucking— Nobody breaks Distro's windows!

Ka'harja jumped as a chunk of wall spun open and light spilt onto the grass. A woman staggered out as if possessed. She was clinging onto the strange moving wall as if her life depended on it.

'Great Star!' the woman exclaimed as she saw Ka'harja. 'It's a little goblin at my door! What are you— What are you doing here? I'm not going to give you food, so if that's what you're looking for you can fuck right off back to the caves.... Go on. Fuck off. *Fuck off you little scumble-butt!*

Too tired to run, Ka'harja stood staring at the loud, sick-looking woman. He was transfixed by how her skin glowed in the firelight. She was so pale... she looked like a living corpse!

'What the fuck?' she breathed, squinting at the child. 'You're the best-looking goblin I've ever seen! Oh, you're not a kobold, are you? Because if you are I'll have no choice but to batter you and stick you in the deep-fryer!'

Ka'harja felt like his heart was going to jump out his mouth. 'I'm not a goblin or a kobold,' he said. 'I'm Ka'hartha— Ka'har... Ka'hartha—'

'*Ka'harja?* That's a Har'py name,' the woman managed to steady herself enough to let go of the moving wall. She let out a snort of a laugh and looked down her nose at Ka'harja. 'Just as well; the deep-fryer's broken. What are you doing here, you little vandal? Run a bit far while hunting?'

'I'm cold and I'm hurt,' Ka'harja admitted, pointing at his wounded leg in a desperate attempt for pity. 'And I don't want to be a Har'py anymore. Plea-th let me th-tay.'

The woman stared for a long, long minute before sniffing and leaning back against the moving wall. She licked her lips for a moment, then squinted.

'You're a runaway?' she asked, continuing before Ka'harja could answer. 'Do you want to be my son? I've been thinking about getting one for a while, and you'd do well enough. Bit thin, but I can fix that for you in a month.'

Ka'harja wasn't sure if she was being serious.

Be her... her son? Was that allowed? Could she just... be his mother? Just like that?

And how would she treat him? Would she be nice? Would she be mean? Would she hit him?

Ka'harja didn't know what to think— But his stomach rumbled and the woman's ears twitched curiously, and she sighed and held out her hands.

'I'm not th-th-ure,' he muttered, creeping closer and feeling warmth seep into his cold joints from the hole in the strange structure. 'But plea-th, can I th-tay with you? I'm tired....'

'Come on in,' she smiled, scooping Ka'harja into her arms and stumbling uneasily inside. 'I'll make you something to eat.'

# Chapter 1

## The Nigelle Farmhouse; Okatako Glif 5<sup>th</sup>, Year 10,053 AE

It was late afternoon and Ka'harja's arms were aching from the weight of the wood he'd collected. He knew he should have put it down on the pile outside, but he was too excited! He didn't want to waste time detouring to the woodpile and so instead he pushed open the farmhouse door with his hip and slipped inside.

He almost caught his tail in the hinge and took in a long, hissing breath as he tried to stop the door from slamming shut; the wood he'd collected scattered across the floor as he let it go on one side, and he groaned. He always seemed to forget the kitchen door was spring loaded. He should have used the main door. Or he should have taken the five seconds to put the wood down like he'd kept telling himself on the walk home.

'Oh well, too late now,' he muttered, dumping the rest of the wood on the floor.

'Ka'harja?' his mother's tired, raspy voice called from the main room, and his ears shot up. 'Ka, Sweetheart? Is that you?'

'Yeah! Handsome boy's home!' he responded loudly. 'I got more firewood! I figured we needed more after the bonfire!'

He contemplated the night before for a moment, before realising his mother hadn't responded.

'Mum?' he called again, only to be met with silence.

He sighed, and stepped over the empty bottles that were scattered across the floor. The house was always a mess; he'd given up cleaning it when his mother had refused to give up her drinking. If she wasn't going to try, why should he bother?

'Mum!' he called again, making his way to the main room. 'Mum you're not going to— Oh Great Star, what have you done to yourself this time?!'

She was stuck mid-air with her feet on the table and one hand on the wall behind her. The other clasp her drink as if *it* were the thing stopping her from falling. Her chair was turned up dangerously underneath her. Or, most of it was. One of its legs was a little ways to the side, snapped in half.

It was very obvious what she had done, and she didn't *really* need to say it, but when she did Ka'harja let out a snort.

'I leant too far back,' she muttered, her croaky voice echoing in her own throat.

'You need a hand?' Ka'harja asked, chuckling.

She shook her head and took a drink from the bottle. 'I'm fine. Just a bit of a headache is all.'

'That's a load of crock!' laughed Ka'harja. He made his way to his mother and scooped her into his arms.

For a moment he cradled her, then he placed her in another seat and pulled his own to the table so he could sit beside her.

'How long were you like that?' he asked.

'Too long,' she sighed, flexing her arms. 'I can't feel shit.'

'Being drunk doesn't help,' Ka'harja pointed out with a sigh. 'You really need to cut back before you drown.'

'Distro Nigelle doesn't get drunk!' his mother snorted in such an exaggerated manner that strands of her oily black hair stuck to her lip; she licked them away awkwardly and scowled. 'What do you take me for? Some sort of mustenel lightweight? I'm a foxen! I'm a fucking beer barrel with legs!'

Ka'harja laughed so loudly he hurt his own ears. 'That's a good one! Put the drink down.'

'No!' Distro mumbled childishly and took another swig from her bottle. 'I'm not drunk! Besides, I lost the lid. I can't let it go to waste!'

'Alright,' he shrugged, then leant forward and gripped the bottom of the bottle tightly.

Ka'harja and his mother glared at each other for a long moment before he gave a tug. It should have been easy to get the bottle off her, being twice her size, but Ka'harja struggled to get a grip on the smooth glass as he and his mother played what was easily the most stubborn game of tug-of-war he'd ever experienced.

Finally, he liberated the drink and threw his head back victoriously; downing what was left of the alcohol in one go and slamming the bottle onto the table. 'THERE! It didn't go to waste.'

'Fuck!' Distro snapped, grabbing the bottle and launching it across the room in a tantrum. 'FUCK!'

There was a crash as the bottle sailed through one of the back windows, and Ka'harja flinched as the glass fell from the frame. 'Mum!'

For a moment she hesitated; turning over what she had done in her mind for a long while. Then she groaned in frustration and smacked her head into the table.

'Stop it!' Ka'harja exclaimed, grabbing his mother and pulling her upright.

Distro pulled away from her son and then gasped, her eyes going wide. 'Ka'harja, your arms! What happened?'

'Splinters,' Ka'harja sighed, turning over his arms to examine the flecks of blood in his dark skin. 'From the firewood?'

Distro shook her head and stumbled out of her chair and towards the kitchen. 'Ointment.'

'Aw, Mum! I don't need ointment!' Ka'harja called after her.

There was a crash and he leapt to his feet; meeting his mother as she came out of the pantry with a large jar of disinfectant.

‘Come here,’ she muttered as she grabbed his wrist and smeared the thick salve onto his skin.

Ka’harja was hit with the smell of garlic and groaned. ‘I’m not going to get an infection—’

‘Because of *me!*’ interrupted Distro, grinning proudly. ‘Wait five minutes, Sweetheart. Then wash it off before it burns.’

Ka’harja rolled his eyes as Distro retreated back into the pantry. He licked a glob of the salve off his arm and followed his mother into the room, ducking under the low doorway and glancing around at the herbs.

It was *supposed* to be a pantry. And they did *call* it a pantry.... But they never used it to store food. Instead, they used it for the magical science of alchemy.

Ka’harja rolled his eyes as he thought about it, and glanced around the room. He knew the contents of each jar by sight, now. It had taken him years to— *By the Eighth child of the Ninth!*

‘Mum!’ Ka’harja snapped, pulling the black-coated jar off the shelf. ‘I told you! I told you last week to throw out the mandrake leaves! Look at it! It’s covered in death-mould! If you leave it any longer it’ll grow legs and walk out on its own!’

‘Death-mould?’ Distro sniffed as she slipped the antiseptic salve back onto its shelf. ‘Well, that can be useful.’

‘No, it can’t!’ Ka’harja exclaimed. ‘It’s called *death*-mould for a reason! What would you make with it?’

‘Kraken deterrent!’ Distro snapped back, swiping the jar from her son and sticking it back on the shelf. ‘Death-mould is a key ingredient!’

‘Mum,’ Ka’harja’s voice was flat.

‘What?’

‘Krackens? Here?’ he motioned around the room. ‘In Okatako?’

‘It’s more likely than you think,’ replied Distro. ‘The year before you showed up I chased off a kelpie that was trying to steal my clothes from the line! I beat it back with a broom, all the way to the river! I had to dose the bank with anti-kelpie spray for almost a month before it finally moved on!’

‘You’re making that up!’ Ka’harja snorted a laugh.

‘Oh yeah? And what part of that story is so unbelievable to you?’ Distro huffed.

‘You never do the laundry,’ chuckling, Ka’harja pointed to his mother’s stained clothes. ‘When was the last time you washed your shirt?’

‘*Yesterday!*’ Distro retorted. Her voice broke and she gave a small cough to clear her throat. ‘I did the washing yesterday.’

‘Bullshit! You’ve been wearing that since Tain!’

Distro hesitated; her tail giving a confused twitch. ‘It’s still Tain, isn’t it?’

‘Great Star, Mum, it’s Glif!’ Ka’harja exclaimed. ‘It’s been a month!’

‘It has not!’ Distro snapped. Then she frowned. ‘Really? Ugh. Whoops. I’ll go get changed.’

‘*Thank* you!’ Ka’harja rolled his eyes and followed his mother out of the room. He stopped in the kitchen to wash the ointment off his arms before heading back to the main room.

He watched his mother fish through a pile of clothes for a clean shirt before

making her way back to the table.

‘I have some good news,’ Ka’harja told her as she sat down. ‘The caravan’s come early. I think they’re trying to avoid us by coming now— But it’s not that easy to stop the Nigelles! When we want something, we take it!’

For a minute, Distro stared at him. Then she snorted, ‘Alright, show me the map.’

All too happy to oblige, Ka’harja shoved a bit of everything off the table until he’d cleared the centre, revealing the map of the area carved into the wood. He didn’t stop to think how strange others may have found it that his mother had, in lieu of paper, taken the handle of a fork to the dining table to teach him the layout of his home.

He pointed to one of the scratches and motioned along it. ‘This is the way they were heading. They had an extra caravan. I think they’re carrying more than usual.... We should fix that for them.’

Slowly, Distro nodded. ‘I don’t know if I’m up for it tonight, Sweetheart. What about in the morning?’

‘They might be gone by morning,’ Ka’harja told her. ‘It’d be better to go tonight.... Though, maybe you should stay here. I can do it on my own.’

‘No you can’t. You’ll get yourself caught,’ she shook her head. ‘If something happened to you where would that leave me? No. You won’t do it. I forbid it!’

‘You know forbidding me from doing things just makes me want to do them more!’ Ka’harja cackled. ‘I’m going to do it. Do we have any invisibility potions left?’

‘Yes, but I’m not telling you where!’ Distro scoffed. ‘You’re not going, and that’s final!’

‘Fine,’ grinning, Ka’harja put his hands on his hips and pressed his ears back cheekily. ‘I’ll make some myself.’

‘You’ll do no such thing!’ Distro nearly fell out of her seat. Her voice creaked like a rusty door as she coughed in surprise. ‘Modification potions are dangerous! You’ll poison yourself! Or turn yourself inside out! Or you’ll make your tail green again!’

‘I’ve watched you make it hundreds of times before,’ Ka’harja argued, dismissing his mother with a flick of his (thankfully again-golden) tail. ‘I’ve memorised the ingredients and measurements. It won’t be hard for me to make.’

‘Yes it will,’ Distro retorted. ‘It’ll be very difficult. So don’t you dare!’

‘I’m going to make it,’ Ka’harja told her. ‘And *that’s* final!’

‘You’re a shame to Welten,’ Distro grumbled, motioning behind herself with a flick of her head. ‘If him and his siblings actually existed they’d descend from the sky and beat the shit out of you.’

Ka’harja gave an amused scoff and looked up to what his mother had motioned at. It was the badly-made tapestry of the Eight Star that he’d sewn as a kid, back when she’d been teaching him the basics of alchemy.

‘Why did you even teach me about the gods if you don’t believe in them?’ he asked with a laugh.

‘We’ve been over this before,’ scoffed Distro, turning to the tapestry. Her voice softened as she stared at the crudely-sewn star. ‘Just because I don’t believe in something doesn’t mean you can’t. I wanted to give you that option.’

Ka'harja opened his mouth to argue— But then he looked back at the tapestry and just shook his head.

He remembered that they'd made it together as a not-so-surprising surprise present; he'd wanted to give Distro something special, but hadn't known how to sew. So she'd had to help him make it.

Ka'harja remembered sewing the little crystal sequins into each section of the star. He also remembered getting the colours backwards and accidentally using sapphire for the alchemy point instead of orange carnelian. It was fixed now, but it had taken him over a week just to pick off the mis-coloured sequins—

'Ka'harja! Finally, you're back on Demrefor,' Distro chuckled. Or, more, crackled. Her voice was barely audible as she laughed. 'You zoned out. You alright, Sweetheart?'

Ka'harja glanced to his mother, who stuck out her tongue. It took him a second to realise he was smiling.

'I was just thinking about when we made that tapestry,' he said, failing to make his face serious. 'I'm pretty sure I still have the dagger you gave me that week. I should fix the hilt sometime.'

Distro's ears pricked up. 'You still have that old thing? I thought you lost it years ago.'

'Well, I sort of have,' he chuckled. 'But only pretty recently. I know it's in the house. Somewhere. Hey! I'm due for another "I love you" gift! Maybe you can get me a shovel so I can find the dagger.'

Distro shook her head and laughed. 'You little wretch! Come on, it's past your bedtime.'

'I'm *eighteen*,' argued Ka'harja.

'And I'm your mother,' Distro said firmly. 'So you're going to go to bed when I tell you to!'

'Yeah, well, I'm bigger than you,' Ka'harja retorted, lunging forward and grabbing his mother in a tight hug. He lifted her off her chair and swung her around. 'And *I* say that it's past *your* bedtime! So *you* go to sleep while *I* start work on that invisibility potion!'

'You little shit!' Distro laughed as Ka'harja threw her onto the bed and tucked her so tightly under the covers she could barely move. 'That's it, you're grounded. Not allowed out of the house for a week!'

'You know that just makes me want to leave the house more!' Ka'harja called over his shoulder as he hurried into the kitchen.

'Get me a drink!' Distro called. 'And don't you dare sass me like you did last time! You know I mean something alcoholic!'

'Fine!' Ka'harja replied, veering away from the pantry to a low cupboard. He opened the door as much as its rusty hinge would allow and pulled out a sealed bottle.

*Seces' Seaweed Saviour* was written in large letters, joined by a stylised illustration of a dark secas silhouette dangling a large clump of seaweed over their mouth. The secas' sharp, triangle features made the bottle seem even more foreign to Ka'harja. It was nothing like the soft illustrations of apples and lizards found on

foxen drinks, and Ka'harja almost wondered if the secas were compensating for their low alcohol content by making their labels more interesting than the actual drinks.

Though, he was surprised there was any Seaweed Saviour left. It had been half a year since they'd stolen the crate of it; if his mother hadn't finished it off it *must* be shit.

*Can't be terrible though*, Ka'harja thought with a heavy sigh. *Secas seem to love it, so...*

He twisted off the lid, breaking the wax seal, and gave it a sniff.

It smelt like dragon's piss in a bottle. But he drank a mouthful of it anyway— And was instantly filled with regret. And vomit. He was going to throw up!

He stuck his head out the kitchen window and spat the horrible drink into the grass. It tasted so much *worse* than dragon piss! There was no way he could give this to his mother. He opted to pour it out the window instead, and found himself wiping his mouth on his arm as he put the empty bottle on the kitchen counter.

'Fucking disgusting,' he grumbled, crouching down to retrieve another drink. 'Barely alcohol. If I ever meet a secas, I'm going to give them a piece of my mind...!'

Then his hand clasp something that... didn't feel like a bottle. It was warm and squishy. He pulled it out and found himself staring at a tiny, shrivelled face dotted with horns and warts, and let out a squeal of shock.

He threw the little creature as he did, and it scuttled across the floor to a rat-sized hole in the wall. It stopped for a moment to turn and hiss before retreating into the wall and loudly scuttling along the inside beam towards the roof.

Ka'harja wanted to throw up again. He leapt to the sink and washed his hands several times before calling out to his mother, 'Mum! Imps in the kitchen again! We need to get more pellets!'

Distro let out an angry wail. 'We just got rid of the fairies!'

'What do you expect with this mess?' Ka'harja retorted, deliberately making his sigh loud enough for his mother to hear. 'I keep telling you; we need to move the compost further from the house! It's attracting them.'

Distro simply let out another frustrated wail, which sounded more crackled than the last, and fell silent.

Rolling his eyes, Ka'harja sighed and crouched down to check the damage to the cupboard. He forced the door open with a loud metal *scree* and took out the few remaining drinks, then peered into a dark hole that gaped in the back of the recess.

Another little face appeared and Ka'harja instinctively slammed the cupboard shut.

He shivered a little, then smoothed his tail and ears flat with his hands and told himself that the problem was solved; he just needed to remember to never open the cupboard again.

It was theirs, now.

He grabbed a bottle from the floor and clambered to his feet; cracking open the lid and taking a sip of the drink. He gagged when he discovered it was another bottle of Seaweed Saviour, which received the same treatment as the last.

He was more cautious of the next bottle and actually read the label.

*The Emperor's Orgasm.*

Nodding in approval, Ka'harja felt his mouth start to water at the thought of the sour apples and bitter luckroot.... And the best ingredient? The juicy run-off from pan-fried spiders? He knew exactly why it was called *The Orgasm*.... But not tonight.

He groaned and put the bottle on the kitchen bench. He couldn't incapacitate himself before trying to make potions. And his mother was already drunk; she needed something more mild.

Instead he searched through the bottles and picked an unaged wolverine wine called *Melberry*. Or, it was supposed to be unaged. He wasn't sure how long they'd had it, with the layer of dust over its top.

He wiped it clean and took a sip. It was alright. It was no *Orgasm*, but *much* better than the Seaweed Saviour. And its flavour wasn't too weak— Oh! He had an idea!

He raced into the alchemy room, quickly emptying a small phial of sparkly green goo into the bottle of alcohol, which he took out to his mother. She was still trapped tightly under the covers, so Ka'harja teased her with it for a moment before finally freeing her and watching as she drank the entire bottle in one go.

'Remind me again why we don't chuck the bottles?' Ka'harja asked as Distro put the empty bottle beside the bed.

She couldn't respond until she'd finished burping. 'You know I use them for my alchemy. It's cheaper this way.'

'Maybe, but do we really need *this many* empty bottles? I can barely walk five steps without—'

'It's either this, or an extra hundred gold a month for clear phials,' Distro interrupted. 'And you know Denni's terrible at picking up our orders! She'd forget half the stock and we'd be stuck with *nothing!* No, no. This works fine for me!'

'Crock!' Ka'harja barked a laugh and nudged his mother. 'But, now that I've got you in a good mood, how about we make that invisibility potion and raid the caravans for all they've got?'

'Fuck no!' Distro exclaimed, jumping on the head of the bed so she was as tall as her son. 'You're forbidden!'

'And that's why I spiked your drink,' Ka'harja grinned, lifting a hand to give a playful wave. 'Night night!'

'*What?*' Distro's eyes widened. Then she collapsed sideways onto the bed and let out a loud snore.

'You can yell at me tomorrow,' Ka'harja chuckled, moving her to a more comfortable position and covering her with the blanket. 'If you remember to.'

# Chapter 2

## The Pantry; The Nigelle Farmhouse Glif 5<sup>th</sup>, Year 10,053 AE

Ka'harja stretched and stood up straight, cursing the cramped alchemy room. Four hours leaning over a foxen alchemy table would do in the back of anyone with even the slightest amount of height on them... but Ka'harja was almost twice as tall as a normal foxen his age, and so he felt like death.

Instinctively he turned to call out to his mother, only remembering at the last second that he didn't want to wake her. He grinned and twitched his sensitive fox-like ears to listen to her snore.

It was loud, which meant she was in a deep sleep. But it was uneven, broken with snorts and grunts like she was choking. He remembered meeting someone else who sounded like she did, once, though he couldn't remember who exactly.... He shook that thought from his mind and made a mental note to bother his mother about visiting a healer.

Not that she would; she never did. She always said she was fine, but Ka'harja had a feeling she wasn't being completely honest with him—

He shook his head again. He didn't want to think about it.

Instead he picked up the mortar and poured the clear, water-like liquid into an empty bottle. He laughed a little when he saw the label: it was an old vinegar bottle. Fitting for the texture of the potion... if he hadn't known what was in it he may have assumed it was just normal vinegar and dipped a fried spider or two in it. Perhaps a prank he could play on his mother later.

Distracted by his own sense of humour, Ka'harja didn't notice the bottle on the floor and went sliding across the room with a shriek and a loud *CLUNK* as he landed on his back.

Pain shot through his right leg and he nearly screamed again.

He banged his head heavily on the floor and waited for the cramp to ease itself out before finally letting himself take a breath; which still came out as a cry of agony.

'Ka'har...' Distro's voice called, trailing off.

'I'm fine!' he wasn't. He wasn't. He wanted to be dead.

After the cramp was over Ka'harja got to his feet and rubbed the sore muscle.

He hated his weak leg. It was a constant reminder of his.... His *luck*. He shook the thought from his mind.

*No use in worrying about past pains, he told himself. Better to focus on the now. The now pains. The pains I have now.*

He limped awkwardly out of the pantry-converted-to-alchemy-room and began looking through the kitchen cupboards. It didn't take him long to find what he was looking for: an old canvas sack in the high cupboard above the stove. He couldn't remember why they'd decided to keep it in the kitchen (or in a cupboard that Distro could barely reach) but that seemed to be its place now. At least it was out of the way of any curious guests that might visit while passing through the area.

Sighing, Ka'harja reached into the cupboard and gripped the sack's corner. As soon as his skin made contact with the cloth the sack vanished from view, and Ka'harja groaned.

He knew it was going to happen. The whole purpose of the sack was for it to turn invisible, after all.... But he really wished his mother had gotten a command-triggered enchantment instead of a touch-triggered one. It would have made it so much easier to find its opening, instead of having to fumble around with the air just to find the drawstring.

It was a pain, but he finally managed to figure out which part of the sack was where and peeked inside the opening.

The inside was clearly visible even though the outside wasn't. He squinted his eyes; trying not to let the perspective of the there-but-not-there object mess with his brain.... At least it was empty and had no holes worn into it.

He chucked the potion phial into the sack and fumbled with the air a moment more, probably looking quite silly, before making his way into the main room of the house.

The place was illuminated in a dull blue glow; the orange evening light had long since faded and all that was left was the light from the soulstone pieces embedded into the sill of each window.

Ka'harja had never liked the glowing crystals —they reminded him of old horror stories from his childhood in Heck'ne, which always made him queasy— but he couldn't deny they were safer than using fire to light the house at night. No need to put them out, no chance of burning the house down. The only real risk was if he broke off the diamond casing and ate the crystal inside.

He shuddered at the thought, which he promptly pushed to the back of his mind as he carefully stepped over to check on his mother.

She was still asleep, thank the eighth child. Not that Ka'harja was worried about waking her; she'd slept through the noise of him sliding across the floor and shrieking, so she wasn't about to wake up from him quietly putting something in a drawer.

He sighed, and slid his necklace over his head. He didn't care about losing the rest of his clothes when he'd inevitably have to strip for the robbery, but he didn't want to lose his necklace.

It wasn't anything special, *really*; just a piece of rope with a cutting of his mother's hair.... But it was the most valuable thing he owned. To him, at least. She'd

given it to him after his adoption had become official. The day he legally became her son.

He could shave her head and tail and none of it would mean as much as this tiny cutting did.

Though... maybe he should shave her head and tail anyway? He'd love to see her reaction to that! Plus, he could justify it as revenge for the time he'd woken up with his feet tied together.

He shook his head to clear it, and quickly shoved the necklace in the bedside table's top drawer. *Stop getting distracted!*

He always got distracted. By everything. He couldn't ever seem to hold his focus.... Not unless it was on something stupid, like the stains on the bathroom wall. Then he couldn't pull himself away from it.

As tempted as he was to go into the bathroom and stare at the dog-shaped stain again, he forced himself to go outside.

He shut the door behind him. Then hesitated.

The air was... *different*. Something ominous seemed to carry on the breeze as the night-bugs fell silent and the owls refused to hoot.

Had something happened? What could—

His ear twitched as he heard it. A far-off scream of pain.

Slowly, he turned to the direction of the noise and stared across the open field.

It sounded again, and he sighed.

The scream was coming from the nearby wasteland.... So there was nothing he could do to help. If a Har'py was dying it wouldn't change anything to go find them; he'd only get himself killed, too.

*'Block it out,'* he whispered to himself. *'You can't help them. Just block it out and go do your job.'*

# Chapter 3

## The Nigelle Farm; Okatako Glif 5<sup>th</sup>, Year 10,053 AE

The night was beautiful, as usual. Stars twinkled in the nearly-cloudless sky as two almost-full moons lit up the world brighter than the nebula behind them; washing the grassy field in silver and blue.

Ka'harja couldn't see the third moon, but that was fairly normal in Okatako. The tiny pink moon was rarely more than a sliver on the horizon, and the few nights it was supposed to be full there always seemed to be a cover of clouds to block the view....

'Shit—' Ka'harja lost his balance as he stepped in a hole. He'd barely managed to catch himself before he tripped in another and landed in a heap on the ground. *'Fuck.'*

He let himself lie in the grass for a moment before awkwardly sitting up and picking at an itch behind his ear. He tugged off a scab, only to realise it was a swollen tick. Wrinkling his nose, Ka'harja crushed the pest between his fingernails until he heard a satisfying crack and felt a droplet of blood roll down his thumb. He flicked the tick away and licked the blood off his hand.

Then he heard voices, and quickly clambered to his feet and ducked into a nearby ditch to hide.

He didn't think he'd get caught— At least not yet. The voices were approaching but they were still pretty far ahead. There was plenty of time to get ready and avoid whoever it was.

Ka'harja took a deep breath. He had to get the potion out of the invisible sack.... He fumbled with it for a few moments before finally finding its opening and retrieving the small bottle. Then he hesitated.

He'd dismissed his mother's concerns earlier, but he knew she was right: modification potions were dangerous. All it would take for his invisibility potion to become a blinded-for-a-week potion was an extra half-spoonful of powered gryphon beak.

And that was one of the *less* painful accidents!

Ka'harja shook himself down. The people who those voices belonged to would

eventually find him if he didn't try the potion. It wasn't *really* a big deal if they found him all the way out here.... After all, he lived in the area and they wouldn't have any idea it was him who'd been stealing, but... he didn't like the idea of meeting the people he was going to rob. If he didn't get friendly with them then he wouldn't have any reason to feel guilty about stealing from them.

Plus he just preferred to avoid social situations. They were boring and exhaustive.

'Bottoms up, I guess,' Ka'harja sighed as he uncorked the phial and closed his eyes. He gagged as he swallowed the sickly-sweet potion, but managed not to throw up. Which was always a plus.

It tasted like sugar and white bread, which meant he'd made it right.

A wave of relief washed over him as he pulled a face and licked the roof of his mouth to try and get the taste out; as much as he hated the sweet taste of the potion he couldn't complain that he wasn't going to explode or have all his hair fall out.

A tingle crept through his skin and he felt a wave of cold shivers shoot up his spine. He burped and a small pink mist floated in front of him like a colourful cold morning breath.... He wasn't sure why it happened when he drank potions, but it always did.

Ka'harja scowled and gave a cough to clear his throat. His mother *never* burped pink! Why did he have to?!

He fanned the pink away with his hand— Though all he saw was the mist thin and fade into the air as if hit by a sudden gust of wind.

Looking himself over Ka'harja couldn't help but chuckle: his clothes looked like they were floating on their own and every movement they made was hilarious to watch. He danced in place for a moment, laughing at himself, before remembering there were people nearby and hunkering down to listen.

The voices were closer than he realised, and Ka'harja found it impossible not to twitch his sensitive ears and eavesdrop while waiting for them to walk past.

'I'm telling you, something's wrong!' a shivery voice exclaimed. 'Did you hear the shouting earlier? It was like something out of a nightmare!'

'It was just a couple of Har'pies having a tiff,' came the reply. 'You need to relax, Naranako.'

'But the Har'pies don't come this far into Okatako!' Naranako responded.

*Yes, they do!* Ka'harja snickered, then remembered how much he wished the Har'pies *didn't* come this far into Okatako and scowled.

'Felelor, I'm really freaking out! This isn't how night's supposed to feel.'

'I'm sure it's perfectly normal for this time of year,' the voice called *Felelor* dismissed Naranako's concerns. 'It's not like the place is haunted or anything!'

An idea sparked in Ka'harja's mind and his heart fluttered. Trying to hold back a snicker, he picked up a stone and threw it towards the voices.

'What was that?!'

Felelor barked a laugh. 'Maybe it was a ghost!'

'Felelor, don't!' Naranako sounded close to tears.

'A Har'py ghost maybe!'

Ka'harja threw another stone and the laughter stopped.

'You heard it that time, didn't you?'

The pair mumbled to each other and Ka'harja strained his ears to hear them. He couldn't understand what they were saying but he heard their footsteps approaching and their argument became clearer.

'*It's ghosts!*' Naranako whispered.

Felelor snapped a quiet response. '*For Scara's sake, I was joking! It's probably just a bird!*'

'*If it's "just a bird" then why are you whispering, too?*' came Naranako's panicked response.

The argument continued, and the entire time Ka'harja was trying not to laugh. He decided to torment the poor men further and took a deep breath.

'GET OUT!' he shouted, putting on a deep, raspy voice. 'Get off of my land!'

Naranako's scream could be easily compared to a boiling kettle's screech, and Ka'harja heard him fleeing in the other direction.

'Naranako you turd!' Felelor shouted after him. 'Get back here! It's just the wind!'

Ka'harja laughed out loud and began to pull off his clothing. It was hard, not being able to see what he was doing, but he was having too much fun to stop. 'How deaf are you?'

'Not deaf enough!' Felelor responded. 'Don't think you're any good at this, my nephew's an idiot who's scared of his own shadow! But me? Not so much.... So come out here now and apologise, and I'll spare you a good beating! Even if you are a Har'py.'

'I don't think so,' still laughing, Ka'harja managed to undress completely and snuck out of the ditch.

He finally got a good look at Felelor. He was quite old. Not ancient, but at least forty eclipses. A somewhat handsome, red-haired foxen.

Ka'harja squinted. *Literally* red hair, it looked like he had smeared tomatoes on his head! Ka'harja bit his lip, trying to keep silent as he crept around the man. He saw Felelor had a sword strapped to his belt. It was two-handed and heavy-looking, and Ka'harja could tell he preferred strength over speed.... He wouldn't find it hard to outrun Felelor if anything went wrong.

*Perfect.*

'Show yourself!' Felelor snapped.

Rolling his eyes, Ka'harja stepped behind the man. 'Sorry, can't do that.'

Felelor whirled around and looked directly at where Ka'harja was standing. He frowned and began spinning around as he searched for the impossible-to-find boy.

'Don't bother to throw your voice,' he barked. 'I'm not falling for any tricks!'

'You've already fallen for about four of them,' Ka'harja couldn't help himself and picked up another rock; a small one. It hit Felelor in the back of the head and the man turned to lunge at nothing.

'WHERE ARE YOU?!' he screeched as he drew his sword. 'I'LL KILL YOU, YOU LITTLE SHIT!'

Ka'harja held back a snicker. *Boy did he get mad quick!*

'I'm a ghooooooooooooost!' he called. He began to dance around Felelor, who

followed his voice frantically. ‘Boo! Blah! Growl!’

‘*Shut up!*’ Felelor snapped. Ka’harja heard his voice break. ‘Shut the fuck up!’

Ka’harja stopped yelling and walked quietly up to Felelor. Slowly, he reached out and tugged on the old man’s tail.

Felelor screamed, dropped his sword, and bolted in the direction he’d been facing.

‘That was fun,’ Ka’harja grinned, nudging the heavy sword with his foot. ‘But now, back to business!’

Far too pleased with himself, Ka’harja jumped into the ditch and retrieved the magic sack. He quickly decided to leave his clothes behind. They were a size too small and getting tattered anyway.... Although it was freezing and Ka’harja wished he had a set of clothes that were enchanted like the sack. Warmth without compromising invisibility? Now that *would* be fantastic! He should ask his mother about it sometime— He shook his head. *Focus! You’re only a few ditches away from the caravan, do you want to get yourself caught?*

He tried to creep both quickly and quietly, but it was difficult enough to do *one* of them without being able to see his own feet. Gingerly, he put his foot down and watched the grass crush under nothing. Then he felt a sharp pain and quickly moved his foot over a few centimetres. He’d nearly stepped on a rock! It was as bad as walking in pure darkness!

‘Look, all I’m saying is Coborn isn’t unattractive!’

Ka’harja looked up so quickly his neck hurt as he twitched his ears and listened for the voice he’d heard. He was much nearer to the caravan than he’d thought! He’d been so focused on watching the ground that he hadn’t been paying attention to what was ahead of him and now he could see it was only a few meters away.

‘Sure, she smells like onions and oil,’ the voice laughed. ‘But have you seen those hips? Yes, *please!* I’d put her on my dick any day!’

‘Lif, you’re the crudest mother fucker I know,’ the scolding was followed by a snorted laugh. ‘You’d put *anything* on your dick.’

‘I wouldn’t put *you* on my dick, you ugly fuck!’ Lif hissed in response. ‘Get fucked, Trat.’

Trat laughed again. ‘And yet you’re still lonely enough to consider fucking onion girl! Man, we need to get to I’reka quick so you can get yourself a good avio woman. You know they’ll get with basically anyone who smiles at them! Even *you’ll* have a chance. Heh.... I could even set you up with Keemi, if you’d like.’

Lif gave a short, dismissive laugh. ‘Yeah, right. Like I’m interested in a fling like that.’

For a moment, the two voices went silent. Then Trat spoke again.

‘And what were you intending to do with Coborn?’ he asked. ‘Marry her?’

‘I— *No!* Lif’s voice broke. ‘That’s not what I meant!’

‘Oh, my gods! You like her?!’

‘No! I don’t!’ Lif defended. ‘I mean she’s hot—’

‘She’s really not—’

‘—but she’s just not my type, you know?’

‘Right,’ Trat scoffed. ‘And I don’t like eating fried spiders! Goddess, Lif, I knew

you had bad taste, but *onion girl?* Really? *Really?!*

Ka'harja folded his ears back to block out their voices. Any remorse the young thief felt for robbing the caravan was gone. He crept close enough to the caravan that he could see the speakers clearly and shook his head. It was just the two of them, leaning against a caravan in their pyjamas with a bottle of something each, their dark hair falling messily over their faces as they scratched and sniffed and joked with each other.

*To talk about a woman that way!* Ka'harja growled to himself. *What a dickbag.*

He skirted around the pair and stuck out his tongue. He wished Trat could see the other gestures he was making as he slid past, but knew he couldn't let them know he was there.

It took all the self-control he had to hold back an angry retort as they continued to gossip.

He knew didn't have any moral high-ground, especially considering he was halfway through robbing them of their valuables, but he couldn't help feeling better about himself.

As he crept away he heard confused shouting in another part of the caravan. It sounded like Felelor was back from his scare, but Ka'harja couldn't be completely sure that it wasn't a new guard he hadn't met, so he hurried forward. He tried to shake the gross conversation out of his head and distracted himself with their accents: they'd been speaking completely in International and had barely sounded foxen. He was shocked they'd not been mustenel or felinic or... *anything* other than foxen. Although, if they were heading to I'reka to trade with the avio they were probably going to Canis La'Can afterwards. The way they spoke *did* sound similar the snow-dwellers' accents....

'Again, Baku?'

A loud feminine voice, this one with a true foxen accent on its tongue, cut through Ka'harja's thoughts and he instinctively hid behind the nearest caravan.

'I'd ask if you'd ever seen a boob before, but you do this every night!'

Ka'harja peered around the caravan and saw another set of guards, two more fit-looking foxens, this time dressed in chainmail and baring weapons.

The young man seemed to snap out of a trance and moved his eyes higher. 'Sorry, Koko, was I staring?'

'Of course you were, you stupid thing! Why are you men so horny all the time?' hissed Koko. 'Is it the night air? Does the cold probe your subconscious and turn on your greater animal instincts? Well, Baku? *Does it?*'

Ka'harja took advantage of their argument and moved to sneak past them. He was careful: the last thing he wanted was to be caught by a foxen woman already in a bad mood. Foxen women were dangerous when provoked and although this one — Koko— had a bow attached to her belt and arrows strapped to her back, Ka'harja was more afraid of the strong muscles he could see her tensing in her frustration at her companion.

'No, I look at you like this during the day, too,' Baku said, seemingly oblivious to himself.

‘Oh, wonderful, because *that’s* the reassurance I needed!’ Koko’s voice dripped with venom. ‘I get enough of that from Lif and Trat! Sometimes I wish you’d all just fuck off back to the port Sken found you in!’

‘I’ll have a talk to the boys if you like. Let them know how much they bother you—’

‘I can handle it myself!’

Baku apologised, sounding sincere, and turned away from his companion. ‘I know you can look after yourself, but I’m always here to help you. With anything! You just have to ask. You know how much I love you.’

Her silence was a telling rejection.

Ka’harja actually felt sorry for Baku as he slipped by him.

Literally slipped. Ka’harja’s heart lurched; he’d let himself become distracted and he’d fallen! He landed on the ground with a grunt and felt his blood run cold as Baku twitched his ears and looked around hastily.

‘Did you hear that, Koko?’

Koko just snapped at Baku to leave her alone, which Ka’harja used to cover the sounds of him struggling to his feet.

‘No, Koko, I’m serious!’ ears erect, Baku stepped towards Ka’harja and looked around suspiciously. ‘I heard something.... Do you think it’s that ghost Naranako was talking about?’

Ka’harja felt his heart beating in his chest as Baku unhooked a long, leather bullwhip from his belt. He began to unravel it slowly and Ka’harja darted behind him.

It was hard for Ka’harja to breathe and he nearly threw up trying to swallow the lump in his throat. This foxen stranger was going to find him and whip him senseless! Ka’harja *really* didn’t like the thought of that.

Baku searched around the side of the caravan they were standing at as Ka’harja watched, but he jumped when Koko called out to him.

‘Baku get back here! There’s nothing out tonight besides the stars and clouds and two of the Goddess’ daughter moons!’

Ka’harja stuck out his tongue. *The Goddess’ daughter moons?* Oh eighth child, these people were *Animon!* Ka’harja couldn’t believe his bad luck. *Animon!* Of all religions to go for why would any self-respecting foxen choose to be a moon-worshipping *Animon!*

Obediently Baku retreated to Koko’s side and Ka’harja stood, not daring to breathe, in the arm’s length they’d left between them.

It took all of Ka’harja’s efforts not to panic. They didn’t know he was there.... *Oh Great Star, his mother was right!* He never should have come here on his own! Even with the invisibility potion he was going to get caught!

His tail brushed Koko’s leg and he jumped forward, only to feel Baku’s tail flick him in the knee.

‘I promise to the Mighty Five, if that touch was deliberate Baku, I’ll—’

Baku took a step away. ‘No, sorry! I didn’t think I was that close! Won’t happen again.’

Koko grumbled and turned away again. She was *not* in a good mood.

Ka’harja felt his lungs aching as his rapid breaths matched his heartbeat. Barely

thinking, but with an idea he couldn't quite reach screaming in his mind, he faced Baku, lifted his open palm stiffly, and slapped the man's left buttock.

Baku jumped in place and dropped his whip in the grass as Ka'harja quickly stepped out of the way.

There was complete silence as Baku turned to Koko.

'That was different,' he said.

'What was different?'

'You slapped me!'

Koko groaned. 'No, I didn't, you twit.'

'You slapped me right on the arse!'

'I did *nothing* of the sort!' Koko rounded on Baku.

Baku just laughed. 'You like me, I knew it! You like me as much as I like you! Admit it!'

'Baku, I swear to Scara I'm going to *kill you!*'

All Ka'harja heard as he sprinted behind the caravan was Baku's high-pitched shout. He froze as Trat and Lif rushed past him, shouting boisterously and obviously ready to join the fight, then continued to the centre of the caravan.

There was a mostly burnt-out fire and a few sleeping rolls that had been dumped ungraciously onto the ground. Ka'harja wanted to kick himself. They were settling down to sleep and if he'd just been a little more patient the robbery would have been a whole lot easier! Now he had to deal with the caravaners *and* he was probably becoming opaque again!

Breathing heavily, he rushed through the open door of the closest caravan and began stuffing things into the invisible sack. He didn't really notice what half of the stuff was: he was too focused on jamming as much into the sack as he could.

'Wh-What in the name of the Th-Three Moons is that?!'

Ka'harja froze. Like the idiot he was he'd forgotten to check if anyone was in the caravan and in his panic had just started blindly robbing the place. He whirled around and let out a quiet sigh when he realised the caravan's inhabitant hadn't been looking at the floating jar of red flowers, and instead had actually been reading a very complicated-looking medical scroll.

'Th-This c-can't be right,' the foxen dropped the scroll on the desk and rubbed his eyes. 'That would re-re-restrict the scapula-la too m-much.... G-Goddess, how do nurlak even sur-survi-survive like this?'

Quietly Ka'harja slipped the jar into the sack and, eyeing the tired-looking man suspiciously, backed out of the caravan.

That was it. Ka'harja decided he'd had enough excitement for one night and hurried away from the caravan. It wasn't hard to get past the guards as they cheered on the escalating brawl. Ka'harja managed to catch a glimpse of Koko clinging to Baku's back as he tried to shake her off. They both had smiles on their faces and looked like they were enjoying themselves far too much for what they were doing.

The last thing he heard as he sprinted away was a loud, angry shout that made the people cheering Koko's name fall silent.

# Chapter 4

## An Open Field; The Nigelle Farm Glif 5<sup>th</sup>, Year 10,053 AE

Ka'harja strut across the grassy field back towards his house. He was feeling extremely proud of himself. He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt this good! He was healthy, slightly richer, and completely naked. His mother was going to be so proud of him!

'And she thought I wouldn't be able to do it!'

He looked up at the sparkling sky and thanked the stars that the robbery went so well. He was almost tempted to thank the moons for it, thinking it would be ironic considering the people he'd stolen from worshipped them, but he shook his head.

That would be a little bit *too* disrespectful.

Ka'harja looked back up and saw two shooting stars falling side by side in the colourful night. Grinning, he took them as a sign of his good fortune as the two shining lights trailed across the sky. They shot to the horizon, growing larger as they fell, and Ka'harja watched as the shooting stars lit up in a yellow flash and illuminated the field as if the sun had suddenly risen.

Two figures were silhouetted in the distance and Ka'harja squinted to make them out as the strange light began to fade, only to be knocked off his feet by a sudden rush of air and loud *BOOM*.

Ka'harja felt numb. His ears were ringing and the rush of air had hit him like a stampeding hoard of dragons. He clambered to his feet but was knocked down again by the sound of a second boom that shook the ground with more force than the first. He lay on the grass for a moment and groaned as dirt thrown up from the sudden gust settled on him.

He felt like he'd been punched in the head. Twice. He could feel his heart beating in his chest painfully; like his anxiety was trying to strangle him to death.

He tried not to panic. To stay calm.

*Something's different*, thought Ka'harja as he swallowed his fears. The night seemed darker than it had before. Were the stars a warning? *Was he in trouble?* He closed his eyes and groaned again. From who? The gods? *They don't exist!*

'NEG'AN!'

Ka'harja barely heard the shouting through the throbbing in his skull.

'Neg'an, are you alright? Neg'an, stand up! We have to keep going! NEG'AN!'

Every movement was agony, but Ka'harja pulled himself to his feet and looked about for the source of the shouting. It wasn't any Empire accent he recognised and it certainly wasn't the caravaners....

He tried to shake the ringing out of his ears and ended up on the ground again, trembling with pain.

'IT HURTS! I CAN'T HEAR! IT HURTS!'

Ka'harja rolled over to look in the direction of the shouting. He saw the two figures again. One of them was standing but the other seemed to be having trouble getting off the ground.

Ka'harja closed his eyes and shook his head. The ringing was starting to fade but his body still ached from the force of being knocked down.

*Was that... a baby crying?*

'MUP!' the voice cried again. 'MUP! MIITA!'

Suddenly it hit Ka'harja.

'Neg'an! Get up! Broja'kar! We have to go!'

*Har'pies.*

This wasn't good. This wasn't good at all!

*What are they doing here?!* Ka'harja couldn't do anything but watch as the pair staggered off in the direction of his house. *Of course they go that way....*

It took Ka'harja a long, long moment before he was able to get to his feet. He would have forgotten about the invisible sack if he hadn't tripped on it, but it reminded him it was there and so he quickly tied the end of it around his wrist so he'd not drop it again and began to painfully limp his way home.

He hoped he'd not meet the Har'pies on the way; hoped that they'd changed direction and headed back towards Heck'ne. He just wanted to get home so he could curl up next to his mother and sleep away the pain, without having to deal with wastelanders.

But of course Ka'harja wasn't that lucky (he never was) and it wasn't long before he saw the Har'pies ambling across the field so slowly he could barely tell they were moving.

They didn't look very strong; more like injured slaves. They were as naked and dirty as he was, except that they were nurlak; with four arms each and pointed ears... it was much better than meeting Har'py warriors. Ka'harja dared to move closer and saw the nurlak had quite an age difference between them, though not how he would have guessed it— The shorter of the pair was the older one; her stocky build clearly showing some sort of growth disorder.

*A mother and her daughter?* Ka'harja guessed. *Running away from Heck'ne....*

The older Har'py moved in a determined manner. They were constantly glancing back and urging on the other, who was in obvious pain after the shock of the falling stars. The younger girl walked with a limp and stumbled several times before stopping and complaining loudly of being in pain. The first Har'py shushed her and obviously expected her to follow as they continued onwards.... Though she didn't.

Ka'harja decided to see how close he could get to the girl and calmly walked

towards her. She didn't notice him as he stood at her side. She was too distracted by a bundle in her arms— A baby!

So he *had* heard a baby cry!

Ka'harja laughed out loud.

The girl jumped and looked up at Ka'harja. She stared at him for a short moment before a wide smile spread across her face and she began introducing herself. 'Abbtah! Mai'hai dankent Neg—'

'GET AWAY FROM HER!' the mother interrupted with a shriek. She stepped between Ka'harja and her daughter and gave a violent hiss. 'If you lay one hand on that berr I'll tear out your throat and shove it up your arse!'

Ka'harja laughed so hard he nearly cried. He knew he should take a Har'py's threat seriously, but he just couldn't. Not with the shocked, open-mouthed look of the daughter peering over the top of her mother.

'Calm down. Calm down,' Ka'harja laughed as he crouched down to put his hand on the mother's shoulder. Though she was short, it didn't feel unnatural to do; she was only a little bit taller than his own mother. 'My name's Ka'har—'

He was cut off abruptly by the Har'py's fist making contact with his nose. It was more painful than he was expecting and he ended up on the ground again.

'Don't touch me!' she hissed. 'I'll— I'll do more than just hit you next time!'

Ka'harja nodded and wiped the blood from his lip.

'*Kekik!*' the daughter gasped. 'Kekik! Why did you hit him? He wasn't hurting me!'

Ka'harja recognised the Har'py word for *mother* and gave himself a mental pat on the back for being right about how they were related.

'What are you looking so happy about?' the Har'py stopped arguing with her daughter and turned to Ka'harja, letting out a throaty grumble of displeasure.

'Just guessed something right,' Ka'harja shrugged, rubbing at his nose and flicking an ear casually. 'Don't worry about it.... Ugh, you have a good punch in you. Remind me not to bend down near you again.'

'You're... a *strange* man,' the mother's ears pressed down as she ushered her daughter back a step and gave Ka'harja a confused glance. Her eyes were tight with distrust and she let out a grunt that sounded more like a growl before sighing and letting her shoulders drop. 'What did you say your name was?'

'Ka'harja,' Ka'harja lifted himself from the ground for the umpteenth time that night and pointed to the sky. 'So how about those falling stars?'

The mother opened her mouth to speak but was interrupted by her daughter.

'They were scary!' she exclaimed. 'And they hurt a whole lot. I could barely get up after they knocked me down!'

'*I've never seen anything like it,*' the mother whispered. She looked at the sky and shuddered as if she were scared it would happen again.

It was an awkward moment of silence. Ka'harja looked at the two women and took the moment to examine them.

They weren't healthy. It looked like they hadn't eaten in days and Ka'harja could have easily counted their ribs. It was pathetic, really.... Not to mention the daughter had mucus and blood dripping down her leg. She looked like she'd only

given birth a few hours ago! Then Ka'harja looked at the baby and realised that it *must* have been only a few hours ago. The baby still had its umbilical cord and hadn't been washed.

'Is that your first baby?' Ka'harja asked without meaning to.

'Baby? Oh, you mean *berr*?' the daughter shook her head. 'Na. It's not my first berr. But it's the first one that's lived this long. All my other berr were born dead.'

Ka'harja wasn't exactly sure what to say to that. He saw the sad look on the girl's face as she stared down at her sick-looking child and felt a pang of sympathy for her. 'They're part *dassen*, I see?'

It wasn't hard to see the baby was half *dassen*. They were covered in birthmarks and had small dragon-like wings wrapped under their four little arms.

'Yi, that's why we're leaving,' the mother stepped in front of her daughter again, her lip twitching as if she was considering baring her teeth. 'Our troop leaders don't like *tia'fio*. Uh— Mixed-bloods. Don't try to stop us!'

Ka'harja lifted his hands in a show of submission. 'I wouldn't dream of it.'

'That's settled then! So why not head back to wherever you dug yourself up and leave us be!' the mother turned her daughter away from Ka'harja and began to push her away. 'Come on, *we have to go*.'

The daughter pulled away from her mother and looked at Ka'harja. 'Can we stay with you, tonight?'

'*Neg'an!*' the mother grabbed her daughter's free wrist and pulled her close. 'Don't ask such things!'

'Sure, why not?' Ka'harja laughed. Then, he softened his voice and turned to the older woman. 'Listen, I know what you're going through. I left Heck'ne too, a long time ago. I know how hard it is.... You're welcome to stay at my place tonight. It's warm and sheltered. And after—' he pointed at the sky and made a face. '—I think we all need a good rest.'

Neg'an hurried to Ka'harja's side as her mother glared, cold and hard.

'I don't trust you,' said the older woman.

'Listen, Mrs... uh,' Ka'harja stopped. 'What's your name?'

The Har'py shook her head. 'I'm not telling *you!*'

'Alright, can I call you Kekik, then?'

She looked so offended, it took all of Ka'harja's self-control not to start laughing again.

'If you don't give me your name, I'm going to call you Kekik,' he warned.

'I'm *not* giving you my name!' she hissed. 'And if you start calling me Kekik, I'll —'

'Kekik it is, then!' Ka'harja interrupted as he put a hand on the Har'py's back and whispered in her ear so that Neg'an couldn't hear. '*Listen, Kekik, I'm trying to help you, here! It's freezing and your daughter looks like she's ready to collapse. My house is only a short walk away. I'm not going to force you to come, but I don't think you should spend the night out in the cold. Especially not with how sick that baby looks.*'

The Har'py closed her eyes and put her face in her hands. 'Fine. But if you try anything I'll—'

'Punch me again? Heh. Yeah, I figured.'

# Chapter 5

## The Crest of a Hill; An Open Field Glif 6<sup>th</sup>, Year 10,053 AE

Ka'harja couldn't help but laugh as the pair followed him through the fields. He'd been weaving his way carefully over the uneven landscape, glancing back frequently to make sure the girls hadn't fallen behind or tripped.

He wasn't surprised that Neg'an had gotten distracted as many times as she had, with the way she'd spoken to him; she'd not seemed completely in her own head (unsurprising, Ka'harja thought, after both giving birth and being hit with the gust from the fallen star). Her mother had needed to urge her on, most of the way, as she'd looked about in a way that seemed almost stunned.

'Neg'an...'

it was spoken as a sigh, and Ka'harja turned to find the woman was now staring up at the sky, her mouth wide open and her torn-up ears flicking back and forth.

'The sky looks like it's alive!' she breathed. 'Kekik, why are there so many stars here?'

'I... don't know,' her mother admitted. 'There's not so many clouds here, I suppose. The clouds hid the stars in Heck'ne.'

'That makes sense,' Neg'an nodded, seeming to accept the answer. Then she let out a long, wistful sigh and rubbed her eyes. 'Why are there so many clouds in Heck'ne? We haven't gone very far at all, but all the clouds are gone and the sky's all colourful and mip. Why's it like that?'

'I don't know.'

'I'll ask Ka'harja,' Neg'an decided out loud before hurrying to Ka'harja's side. 'Ka'harja? Can I ask a question?'

'You just did,' Ka'harja joked.

'Oh, did I?' for a moment, Neg'an blinked. Then she flicked an ear and readjusted her grip on her baby. 'Then I need to ask you another one. Do you know why there are so many clouds in Heck'ne?'

'Probably dust in the air,' Ka'harja told her. 'Though if you ask a religious folk you'd probably get told it's *Dark Sky*.'

'Dark Sky?' Neg'an echoed. 'Is that when the sky is dark? Does it have another

name when it's not dark? And what does the sky being dark have to do with religion?'

Ka'harja snorted a laugh and scratched the back of his head. 'I don't know much about it, but some people think that a starless sky means there are no good spirits because evil ones have chased them all away. Basically, the sky goes dark and you get people who believe in the Goddess screaming and freaking out that they're going to die.'

'The Goddess?' Neg'an blinked. 'Do you mean Zen'efay?'

An itch crept over Ka'harja's scalp at the mention of the Har'py's deity, and he shook his head. 'No. I mean Scara.'

Neg'an pulled a sour face and looked away. 'I've heard of her. She makes Heck'ne a wasteland because she hates us and wants us all to be unhappy and sick and die starving. She makes life bakti.'

'Wow. It's been a *long* time since I heard someone say that,' Ka'harja half-chuckled. 'Most Animon say she's the soul of the planet, and that Heck'ne is a scar that she can't heal because Zen'efay rules it.'

'Animon?' Neg'an's unhappy expression faded into curiosity, and her ears twitched. 'What's an Animon? Are they like a nurlak or a dassen or a foxen? Do they have wings? Or tails? Or big ears?'

'Animon isn't a race,' Ka'harja corrected. 'It's a religion. Think of it like a... a reverse Har'py. They worship Scara and think Zen'efay is the evil one.'

'*Really?*' Neg'an frowned, though it wasn't an angry frown; it was like she was so deep in a strange thought that it hurt. 'Zen'efay. Scara. Reverse.... I suppose that makes sense. Because Zen'efay *did* tell Scara to put her head in her own hoourknah, didn't she? So people who like Scara won't like Zen'efay.... Yi! That makes sense.'

Ka'harja's laugh hit him so sudden and loud that he choked on his own spit. 'Yeah! When Zen'efay refused Scara's light, Scara was pretty mad about it, wasn't she?'

'Her light?' Neg'an blinked curiously. 'What light?'

Ka'harja shrugged. 'Animon believe that when we die, Scara gives us some glowing hair or something, and then we become stars.'

'We become stars? I thought that when Scara got you, she dragged you into the planet and buried you in the deep dark Underfor and left you there.'

*Underfor*, Ka'harja shuddered at the word, pushing back the memory of how close he'd come to seeing it for himself. 'That's— That's the Har'py version of it. In the Animon version, she takes the dead into the sky and turns them into stars.'

'So... Wait. All the stars up there are dead people?' Neg'an looked up, a horrified expression spreading across her face. 'Dead people wrapped in glowing hair? That's a lenta thought!'

'Close your mouth,' Ka'harja barked a laugh. 'It's supposedly a reward for being a good person in life— But don't ask me for details. I'm not Animon, I don't understand it either.'

'You're not an Animon?' Neg'an cocked her head sideways and blinked several times. 'Are you a Har'py, too?'

'No,' Ka'harja shook his head. 'Not anymore, anyway. I don't believe in gods or

goddesses or any of that crock. I'm an atheist. I don't have a religion. The closest I've got to one is knowing about the Eight Star magics.'

'*Eight Star magics?*' Neg'an whispered, looking back to the sky. 'Is that magic that comes from eight stars? *Which* stars? Can you point them out?'

Ka'harja groaned. 'It's magic from one star with eight points. The star was made by a family of gods. Blah blah blah. No big deal. It's not even real, so don't worry about it.'

'Hm.... Stars seem like they are very important things,' said Neg'an. She walked beside Ka'harja quietly for a moment before continuing, 'I would like to be important one day, too. But I don't think I ever will be.'

'I'm happy being a nobody,' Ka'harja chuckled. 'Nothing's expected of you and you can get away with a lot more than you could if people knew who you were.'

'Get away with things?' Neg'an asked. 'What do you mean?'

'Like, uh... being a little bit rude,' Ka'harja told her. 'Eating too much. Not having a bath everyday—'

'Bath?' echoed Neg'an. 'What's a bath?'

'When you clean dirt off yourself with water,' said Ka'harja. 'Sorry, shouldn't have assumed you'd know what that meant.'

For a moment, Neg'an was quiet. She looked around the ground and bit her lip and twitched her ears. Then she looked back to Ka'harja, her eyes sparkling, 'So why don't you have a religion? Do you not like gods?'

'I like the *idea* of them,' Ka'harja admitted. 'Like Scara? A deity who loves everyone and wants to protect them? That's great! I just... I don't know. It's hard to believe that something like that's real.'

'Scara loves everyone?' Neg'an gasped. 'Gighi, really? She really loves everyone? How is it possible to love *everyone*? Does she meet them all secretly? Does she shape-change and pretend to be someone else so she can know everyone enough to love them? And do other things love everyone? Like grass! Does grass love everyone like Scara does?'

'Gr—' Ka'harja nearly choked. 'Grass? Why are you asking if *grass* loves everyone?'

'Because I like grass a whole lot?' Neg'an's voice rose a pitch, as if she couldn't understand how her thought wasn't as clear to Ka'harja as it was to herself. 'And I want to know if it likes me back. Why else would I ask a question like that?'

'Neg'an, leave him alone,' Neg'an's mother quickly grabbed one of her daughter's spare hands and tried to lead her away. She gave Ka'harja an anxious glance. 'Please, don't be mad at her. She doesn't understand.'

'No, it's alright,' laughing, Ka'harja bent down and ripped a handful of grass out of the ground. 'Grass can't feel hate. Unless you're allergic to it. Then it tries to kill you. But you don't have any swollen red marks on your feet, so you're probably not allergic.'

Neg'an's eyes sparkled as Ka'harja threw the torn grass over her like confetti.

'So it— It loves me back!' she exclaimed. 'And it can be my friend?'

Her mother sighed at this and frowned. Her hard gaze met Ka'harja's eye and the corner of her lip twitched. 'I'm not explaining this to her again. You can fix what

you've just done.'

Nervously, Ka'harja put a hand on Neg'an's back. He wasn't sure *what* he'd "just done," exactly, so he had no idea how to fix it. 'Grass... isn't.... It's not really alive—'

'But it can die?' Neg'an's voice was so firm it shocked Ka'harja into silence. 'And if it can die, then it's alive. If it's alive, it has feelings! And if it has feelings, it can be my friend.'

'I... can't argue with logic like that,' Ka'harja coughed, and shrugged at Neg'an's mother. 'Sorry, Kekik.'

Neg'an looked at her frustrated mother for a moment before dropping to her knees and hugging the woman. 'Kekik, what's wrong?'

'Nothing, my little carrot, just... terr basaka tarr kami maka.'

What? She thought he was lying?

Excuse her?

*EXCUSE HER?!*

He was *not* a "maka"!

Well— Maybe he couldn't deny that he was a *bit* of a liar. *Sometimes*. But not *right now* he wasn't lying! He was trying to *help* her! Of all the ungrateful...!

'Dreankot!' Ka'harja gave an offended scoff, watching Neg'an's mother pale. 'And I'll say it again in International, too, just for good measure: *rude*. Kizza icha International. I speak Har'py, too.'

Neg'an looked between Ka'harja and her mother, then kissed her mother on the cheek and jumped back up to Ka'harja's side. She stepped between Ka'harja and her mother, as if shielding her, and then blurted loudly (and perhaps with a tone a little more nervous than before): 'If the stars are people, then what's rain?'

'*Rain?*' Ka'harja echoed, so taken aback by Neg'an's change in subject that he forgot he was annoyed. 'Wh.... Rain is.... Rain is when the sky cries.'

The look Neg'an's mother gave Ka'harja could have very easily killed him had Neg'an not turned around and gripped her excitedly.

'I knew it! I knew it!' she exclaimed. 'That's what I thought too! Everyone always said I was hakalika and that the sky didn't cry! But you know it too! It *must* be true if we *both* think it!'

'How far away did you say your home was?' Neg'an's mother looked like she'd had enough of Ka'harja to last a lifetime.

'Just over that hill there,' Ka'harja did feel a *little* bad about the grass comment—he hadn't thought that Neg'an would take everything the way she did— but he wasn't going to feel guilty for talking about why it rained. Instead he continued ahead, knowing his home was just over the slight rise; hidden well from anyone who'd never seen it before.

When Neg'an saw it she let out a shout, '*GIGHI!* WHAT IS THAT?! IT'S HUGE!'

'That's where I live,' Ka'harja told her.

'It's like a giant hovel!' she clapped her free hands and jumped up and down— But stopped herself when she nearly dropped her baby. 'Oh, oh!'

'Careful, carrot!' her mother exclaimed, quickly taking the child from her and

holding them firmly. ‘Don’t jump around. You’ll hurt yourself.’

‘But look at it!’ Neg’an breathed. ‘It’s so— It’s so— I *love* it! Kosson!’

Ka’harja laughed at that. ‘It’s pretty great, yeah! Come on, I’ll show you inside.’

‘We get to go *inside*?!’ Neg’an’s voice rose again, and she pulled on her long black hair in excitement. ‘Kekik! Kekik! We get to go inside!’

Neg’an’s mother gave a gentle nod and quietly followed Ka’harja down the hill. She didn’t say much as they made their way to the front door, though she let out a gasp as the warm air from inside flowed out and brought colour back to her pale cheeks.

Ka’harja chuckled before ducking inside. And then immediately let out a frustrated sigh.

Everything had fallen over.

It was absolute shambles.

Bottles had smashed, books were strewn across the floor, and the chairs were all sideways.... The only thing that *hadn’t* noticed the force of the quake from the fallen stars was his mother; who was about five steps away from the bed, still asleep on a pile of scrolls.

Pushing the idea of having to clean up to the back of his mind, Ka’harja guided the girls into the house and motioned to the floor, ‘Try not to step on anything.’

‘*Gighi*, it’s really messy in here!’ Neg’an pointed out, carefully taking her baby back from her own mother. ‘Is it always like this? Do you like this sort of mess? Can I make it messier, or are you going to clean it up?’

Ka’harja shrugged and began to untie the invisible sack from his wrist. ‘It’s usually only the bottles that get everywhere,’ he tried to put the sack of stolen goods down without the girls noticing, but Neg’an turned to him as he dropped it and he knew she’d seen it. He tried to act inconspicuous and motioned to the mess again. ‘The rest is normally more organised.’

‘Oh.... Oh! Who’s that?’ Neg’an asked as her eyes fell on Distro. ‘She doesn’t look very comfortable. Why is she so pale? Is she sick?’

‘That’s my mum,’ Ka’harja replied. ‘My kekik. She’s fine; I’ll move her in a bit. Just leave her.’

The young nurlak continued to stare at Distro with the most intrigued look Ka’harja had ever seen. She crouched down next to his mother and reached out to touch her. ‘She looks like the sky has fallen on her face!’

‘I said to leave her!’ without thinking, Ka’harja stepped to Neg’an’s side and firmly gripped her wrist. ‘I’ll sort her out later!’

‘NO! I’m sorry!’ Neg’an ducked her head down and covered her face with her free arm. ‘Please don’t hit me! I’m sorry!’

Ka’harja let her go and stepped back, realising what he’d done. ‘No, no! I wouldn’t! It’s okay! *It’s okay!*’ he glanced back and saw Neg’an’s mother frozen in place. She looked as terrified as her daughter. ‘I’m not like that. I’m sorry. Uh.... *Na... kiita*. *Na kiita*. *Kizza kiita*. I’m a good boy. *Kizza kiita*.’

‘*Kizza kiita?*’ slowly, Neg’an lowered her arm and met Ka’harja’s eye. She was shivering and Ka’harja could tell by the twitching of her long, shredded ears that she was surprised. ‘You’re not going to hit me?’

‘Of course not,’ Ka’harja said simply. ‘I want to help you. I shouldn’t have snapped. I’m sorry.’

‘You want to help me,’ Neg’an repeated. There was a pause before she continued, ‘Then help me know why your kekik looks like she has the sky on her.’

It took a moment for Ka’harja to process what she’d asked. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Under her eyes,’ Neg’an pointed. ‘She has small dots, like stars.’

‘They’re called freckles,’ he said. ‘Haven’t you ever seen someone with freckles before?’

‘Nobody in our troop has them,’ Neg’an’s mother seemed to find herself and hurried to her daughter’s side. ‘And our troop doesn’t socialise much with outsiders.’

‘Well, you obviously did,’ Ka’harja laughed and pointed to Neg’an’s child. ‘I’ve never ever, not *once*, heard of a dassen living in Heck’ne! If you tell me that the dassen you bonked was a Har’py, I’ll shave my tail and eat the fur!’

‘What’s “*bonked*”?’ asked Neg’an.

‘Nothing,’ Ka’harja said. ‘Don’t worry about it.... Hey, I’ll go get some water for you so you can wash off, and then get you something to eat. How’s that sound?’

Neg’an’s face lit up. ‘Are you going to show me how to have a bath? I really want to know how! How cold is the water? Is it from a river or a pond or a puddle? Can I drink it? Or is it poison? A lot of water in Heck’ne is poison, because it sits so still in the mud for so long! Is this water poison, or—’

# Chapter 6

## **Curled up in Bed; The Nigelle Farmhouse** **Glif 6<sup>th</sup>, Year 10,053 AE**

Ka'harja woke up before Distro, as usual. And even though the woman had been asleep for a good few hours more than she usually slept, she continued to snore relentlessly beside her son and showed no signs of waking up any time soon.

But it didn't bother Ka'harja; it had been years since Distro had woken up on time. Plus, he'd given her that sleeping potion. And she'd been the one to make it; meaning it worked well. Probably better than she'd intended it to work. Her potions were usually like that.

He blinked as his tired eyes tried to adjust to the dull light of the morning. The room was illuminated yellow-white and everything was damp. Ka'harja groaned. He'd forgotten about the window his mother had broken and now the morning dew was soaking into their blanket.

The foxen boy had to be careful not to kick his mother as he stretched. The shared bed was cramped, but it was warmer than sleeping alone. Ka'harja thought back to the freezing nights he'd spent in a bedroll on Distro's floor before crawling under the blanket with her and asking, in the most pitiful voice he had been able to muster, if he could share his guardian's bed. He'd claimed to have had a nightmare, but Distro had caught onto his lie and told him he was welcome to sleep next to her for the rest of the Snowfall months.... Somehow that three-month agreement had turned into eight years of sleeping back-to-back. Not that either of them minded.

Ka'harja rubbed his face and climbed out of bed. The chill air brought his thoughts back to reality and he checked to make sure he hadn't accidentally pulled the blanket off his mother. It was mostly covering her, but he still tucked the blanket around her properly, kissed her on the cheek, and stumbled to the kitchen.

He could tell something was going to be different about today, but he couldn't remember what had happened the night before. He ached like he'd had a party but all he remembered was pretending to be a ghost and slapping someone on the butt. He didn't remember who, though.

He was searching the kitchen desperately for something to eat when he came across the bottle of Emperor's Orgasm that he had put away the night before. He didn't hesitate to uncork the bottle and drink half of it, justifying it as his breakfast.

The last gulp was messy, as he choked and coughed a mouthful of the drink onto the kitchen floor. He figured he'd had enough, then, and re-corked the bottle.

Not bothering to clean the spill, Ka'harja instead went to check the broken window. Though he frowned as he walked back through the house. Everything was an absolute mess! Did they *actually* have a party last night? He didn't think he would have had one. Even if he had wanted to, he had nobody to party with. And it would be obvious if his mother's friends had come over again. His aunt Denni would have been the one to wake him, if she were over.... He stopped at the broken window and stared out across the grassy field.

Golden clouds were hanging low on the horizon of the faded blue-grey sky and everything looked normal, if not a bit shaken. Flying bugs shot about and Ka'harja could hear birds chirping in the distance.

*Hm....*

Was the well always on that angle?

Ka'harja cocked his head until the well stood straight in his vision.

No... no.... He didn't think that was right at all....

'Mip flakha syun.'

Ka'harja nearly jumped out of his skin at the voice behind him, and turned to see a young nurlak girl clutching a bundle of clothes. She looked familiar, but he couldn't place it.

'Uh.... Good morning to you, too?' he managed. 'I'm sorry— *Who* are you?'

'You don't remember?' she said. *She looked tired.* 'You helped me and my kekik save my berr.'

Oh. Yes. He remembered now. 'You're Neg'an, right?'

'Not anymore!' she exclaimed excitedly. 'I'm changing it!'

'Ah. Well, if you're going to change your name now's as good a time as any,' Ka'harja laughed as he turned back to the window. 'What are you gonna call yourself? And what's your kekik's name?'

'I'm going to call myself Stars,' she responded. 'Kekik is called Dena'cosa, but she prefers to be called Dena, without the cosa, like *her* kekik wanted her to be called.'

'I see,' Ka'harja said as he examined the girl. She was an oddity, even for a Har'py. There was something about her he just couldn't place and he tried to mentally list off her details to find out what it was.

She was wearing an old shirt of his, although it was backwards. He remembered ripping new holes into old clothes while the girls bathed so they could fit their four arms in comfortably. But he didn't remember Stars' hair being that long; it was almost down to her knees and seemed a darker, shinier black than it had been before. She seemed paler too, now that all the dirt and dried blood had been scrubbed off her face. Although her skin was still a sickly grey-beige that made her cheekbones seem even more prominent than they already were.

'And my berr is going to be called Little Demon,' Stars' happy addition interrupted Ka'harja's thoughts, and all he could do was laugh.

*Little Demon!* That's exactly what Har'pies would consider a mixed infant!

'What's funny about the name?' Stars twitched a damaged ear and Ka'harja had

to force himself to stop snickering. 'It's what it is, and it's what I will call it! Don't be dreankot!'

'I'm sorry, it's just—' Ka'harja took a deep breath. 'It's different from the names we have here. So's the name "Stars," actually. Very different from what people here call themselves.'

'I don't mind being different,' Stars said. She flicked her head slightly and brushed her hair out of her eyes.

Ka'harja gasped. 'Oh, Great Star! You only have two eyes!'

The nurlak nodded. 'Yes.'

It took Ka'harja a second to compose himself. *That* was what had seemed so off about her! She only had two eyes instead of the four that nurlak were usually born with. *How weird...*

'You look different, too,' Stars spoke as if she'd read his mind. 'You're too tall for a foxen. You should only be this high.'

Ka'harja laughed as Stars held her hand to her hip.

'That's how tall all the foxens in my troop are,' she said simply. 'And that's how tall you should be. But you're not. You're as tall as my ears reach! Why is that?'

'I just am?' Ka'harja didn't feel like discussing it. Explaining the lingering effects of mis-measured potions to a non-chemist, let alone a *Har'py*, wasn't a very appealing conversation. So instead he tried to change the topic. 'So, uh, did you sleep well?'

'I didn't sleep at all,' Stars said.

'Why not?' Ka'harja asked. No wonder she looked so tired! 'Was it too cold? I could have found another blanket for you if you'd asked.'

Stars shook her head. 'I was worried about my berr,' she said as she motioned to her baby. 'I wasn't sure when it would be hungry, or if its crying would wake me. It cries so quietly.... I didn't want to lose it like the others. It's the first one I've had long enough to name, and I really love it a lot. *Tirr kosson farfah berr. Yi. Farfah berr kami tai. Tarr kami taa'han.*'

Ka'harja's chest tightened as Stars looked down to her child and cooed her whisper: *I love my baby. Yes. My baby is alive. They are brave.*

How was he supposed to respond to something like that?

'I wasn't sure anyone would hear it if I slept,' Stars continued, looking back up to Ka'harja. 'So I didn't sleep. Although now I'm tired and my head hurts. Miita.'

'*Ouch*, huh?' Ka'harja echoed Stars in International. 'I'm sorry.... You could try and get some sleep now. Although you should have something to eat before you go back to bed.'

'Eat?' Stars looked surprised. 'But we only ate last night! Are you really going to give me *more* food?'

'Of course!' Ka'harja exclaimed. 'Eating every day is healthy, and it will help you make enough milk for your Little Demon.'

'Will it?' Stars asked. 'Gighi! Okay, I'll eat. But I'm not a very good hunter, so I can't help you catch it.'

'No need to catch anything!' Ka'harja said proudly as he led Stars to the kitchen. He dramatically pulled a sack of oats out of a cupboard. 'Bam! Porridge!'

'It looks like dust,' Stars observed. 'Does it taste like dust?'

'If you don't cook it, yeah,' Ka'harja laughed and continued pulling things out of the kitchen cupboards. 'Let me light the fire here and I'll cook it up and make it taste good! You like spiders?'

Stars stiffened. 'Oh, na! They're awful! Absolutely mup! And the big ones always attack us! Tah'liki got bitten once and his whole arm swelled up—'

'I meant for eating,' Ka'harja corrected himself. 'But I'll take that as "*oh, please don't add any into the porridge, I'd prefer if you put in apple slices!*"'

Stars giggled and agreed. 'Yi, Ka'harja.... Should I wait in here with you?' she asked.

'Why don't you go wake your kekik?' Ka'harja suggested as he put the porridge on the stove to cook. 'Give you both a good ten or so minutes to get yourselves ready to eat.'

Stars nodded enthusiastically and bolted out of the room. 'KEKIK! Ka'harja says we can bini kan!'

Ka'harja chuckled. He wouldn't expect someone from Heck'ne to be this entertaining. Not in such a sweet way. She almost reminded Ka'harja of a kogarg boy he'd had a fling with a few years back... *that hadn't turned out too well*. He didn't want to think of it, so he grabbed the half-drunk bottle of Orgasm and downed the rest.

He wanted to mix it into the porridge like his mother would have done, but he didn't think it was a good idea to give alcohol to his guests. Not when they had an infant to feed.

'Ka'harja!' Stars rushed back into the room. 'Kekik's awake, but she doesn't want to come in and talk. I told her she should, but she said she doesn't like you much, so I told her she's just being silly and that you're great, and then she told me that *I'm* silly and trust too easy, and then she kissed me on the forehead and told me that I should keep you company and say eewowm. Oh! Yi! I *should* say that! Thank you! For the food and shelter and bath. You're kami mip!'

*He was the best, wasn't he?* Ka'harja grinned at Stars and left the porridge to simmer. 'You're welcome.'

Still smiling, Stars looked at the kitchen window. 'Can I look outside?'

'Sure!' Ka'harja watched as Stars hurried to the window and tried to lean out, only to bang her head on the glass. Ka'harja bit his lip and chuckled as he was distinctly reminded of one of his own experiences learning about the world outside Heck'ne.

'What is this?' she asked as she touched the smudge her forehead had left on the otherwise clear window. 'It's like the air has gone hard!'

'That fooled me first time I saw it, too!' Ka'harja laughed. He was lying a little; he hadn't understood what glass was for almost a full year after discovering it. 'It's a window. The hard air is called glass.'

Stars tilted her head to the side and flicked her ear innocently. 'Glass?'

'Yeah, glass.'

'Is it like grass? Its name sounds like grass.'

'No, it's... more like see-through rock,' Ka'harja laughed. 'But it's very easy to

break, so don't lean on it or hit it!

'What happens if it breaks?'

Ka'harja gave the porridge a quick stir and took it off the stove. 'It'll turn into tiny sharp rocks and bite you.'

It was hard not to laugh as Stars jumped back from the window. Her mouth was hanging open and her ears stood erect as she stared, wide-eyed and unblinking, at this now-dangerous beast that could attack at any time. She shielded her baby with all four of her arms, pressing it against her chest protectively.

'It will only bite you if you break it,' Ka'harja told her. 'You can still look out of it! Just don't touch it.'

Ka'harja could barely take his eyes off Stars as she crept carefully back to the window and the first scoop of hot porridge ended up on the floor. He was more careful with the next few spoonfuls, which he scooped into a bowl and handed to Stars with a warning to be careful; it's hot.

Stars ate very slowly. She licked the porridge out of the bowl like a cat, smacking her lips with each lick and flicking her ears excitedly.

'Good, huh?' Ka'harja scooped some into a bowl for himself and stood next to Stars as she nodded happily. He decided to open the window a crack, as the steam from cooking was making it hard to see outside.

Stars watched him open the window with quiet amazement. She continued to stare outside for quite a while, a wistful look on her face. Then, after a while of quiet, she spoke. 'The sky is so kama here.'

'It is beautiful, isn't it?' Ka'harja agreed. 'Much better than in Heck'ne.'

'You've been to Heck'ne?' Stars turned her curious stare to Ka'harja. Then she smiled. 'Oh, yes! You said that yesterday.'

Ka'harja drank the thick porridge like soup. He wasn't fussed by how hot it was. He'd gotten used to burning sensations in his throat from drinking so many potions, and hot porridge was almost soothing compared to some of the mistakes he'd digested. He burped loudly and chucked the bowl next to the pot of porridge. He'd have seconds, of course. He always had seconds.

'Ka'harja?'

'Hm?' Ka'harja turned to Stars. 'What's up?'

Stars looked up at the roof before looking back to Ka'harja. 'I have a question.'

Ka'harja nodded and waited for her to ask. He was met with silence as Stars got distracted by a bug on the windowsill. A large black fly that buzzed unpleasantly was thinking about coming into the house. In the end, it decided not to and whizzed away, and Ka'harja continued to wait patiently until Stars turned back to him.

'You wanted to ask me a question?' Stars cocked her head.

Ka'harja barked a laugh. 'I thought that it was *you* with the question!'

'Oh, yes! It was,' Stars corrected. 'Did your kekik take you away from Heck'ne, like I'm taking my berr?'

'What? Oh, no,' Ka'harja felt himself stand up straighter as he was put on the spot. 'Distro isn't my... she wasn't my first mother. I'm a...' he considered his next word carefully, finally settling on the simplest way to say it. 'I'm an *orphan*.'

'I thought that orphans were supposed to stay orphans,' Stars' voice became

muffled as she started to lick the last of the porridge from the bottom of her bowl. 'Isn't it the law?'

'Not out here,' Ka'harja corrected.

'But wasn't it disrespectful to your honour as a Har'py?' Stars blinked. 'For her to think you couldn't look after yourself and to take you as her own?'

'It was my choice. I *asked* her for help,' Ka'harja said, simply. 'I didn't want to be a Har'py, so she took me in and let me become something else. She gave me food and clothes and did everything else a mother is supposed to, and that's what she became to me. Har'pies mightn't agree with it, but by Empire law, I'm her son. And I like it that way.'

'Oh,' Stars rocked on the balls of her feet for a second and glanced down at her baby. 'So... she did what you're doing now, for me and my berr? Letting us become something else.'

'Sort of,' Ka'harja grinned. 'Only I'm not going to become the adoptive father of your child anytime soon!'

Stars laughed and turned back to the window. 'That would be silly. It already has a yalfit!'

'What's his name?'

'I've told you its name!' Stars laughed again. 'Little Demon.'

He had to resist the urge to playfully roll his eyes. 'I meant their father's name.'

'Its father's name?'

'Yes, their father's name,' Ka'harja grinned. He stepped around Stars so he could stand by her side to talk. He'd rather see her face than the back of her head. 'The *dassen* you fuck—'

Ka'harja didn't have the chance to finish his sentence as his foot slid out from underneath him. He reached out to grab something —anything— to stop himself from falling but just ended up knocking pots and pans off the bench, which landed on top of him as he smacked the back of his head on the hard stone floor. He smelt strong alcohol and sour apples as the wet puddle he had slipped in soaked into his tail fur.

He groaned; he hadn't meant to squeal when he fell but he was sure that loud shriek had been his.

'Are you alright?' Stars didn't seem too fazed by Ka'harja's accident. There was concern on her face, but her voice was flat.

'*Fucking Orgasm*,' Ka'harja sobbed.

Stars gently put her baby down on the kitchen bench and started to move the pots off Ka'harja and onto the floor. 'That's an odd thing to happen after falling over.'

Ka'harja didn't bother explaining that the Emperor's Orgasm was a drink. Instead, he let her help him up and limped to the window. 'Day's getting warmer.'

'Is everything okay?' Stars' mother stuck her head into the kitchen. She glared at Ka'harja with such a vicious look that for a moment he was worried she was going to pick a fight... but then she softened her gaze and turned to her daughter. 'Carrot?'

'I'm okay, Kekik,' Stars told her. 'It's Ka'harja who got hurt.'

'*Good*,' Dena mumbled under her breath. She tensed when she realised Ka'harja had heard her, and retreated hurriedly out of the room.

'You look upset, Ka'harja,' Stars said simply. Then she seemed to realised what had been said and stared at Ka'harja with wide, scared eyes. Ka'harja raised a hand to comfort her but she flinched away. 'Please don't hit me!'

'I wasn't going to,' he slowly put his hand on her cheek. 'I was just going to put my hand here, like this.'

'Kekik does this sometimes,' Stars relaxed as Ka'harja stroked her face. She closed her eyes and let out a long breath. 'It's nice.'

Ka'harja pulled his hand away from Stars and turned to the window.

They watched as the sky turned from pale grey and bright yellow to vivid blue and shimmering white. Stars' breathing got heavier, and Ka'harja realised just how amazed she was by the sky's beauty.

'It looks like my kekik's eyes!' Stars said wistfully.

Ka'harja grinned. 'Your eyes look like that, too.'

'*Really?*' Stars exclaimed. 'But the sky's so kama! So beautiful! My eyes can't be that colour.'

'Are you joking? You're gorgeous!' as he stared into her eyes, Ka'harja couldn't help thinking to himself that he knew Stars from somewhere. That they'd met before... but he just couldn't seem to place it.

She must have been someone he'd known before he left Heck'ne; but he figured that she couldn't have been anyone he knew *too* well if he didn't remember her by name or face.

*Or maybe it was just his brain forgetting everything, again...*

Stars blushed and looked to the floor. 'I'm sorry, we can't be myits.'

'Whoa, *no*,' Ka'harja took a step back. 'That's not what I was trying to— No. Na.'

Stars looked confused. Her cheeks were still red and she mumbled when she spoke. 'But you're being so nice to me... and complimenting me. And you think I am kama.'

'That doesn't mean I'm flirting with you,' Ka'harja explained. 'Look, I don't like girls. I'm gay. *Gay*. Boys only for me. Bal'hiki kata.'

'But why else would you compliment someone, if you don't want to have sex with them?'

Ka'harja shrugged. 'Because you notice something nice about someone and think it would make them happy to hear?'

'But if you're "*gay*," then how can you tell if a girl has something nice about them?'

'I'm not fucking blind, that's how!'

Stars flinched, and Ka'harja felt bad for snapping.

He let out a sigh and rubbed his forehead. 'Not *everything* revolves around sex,' he said simply. He couldn't help but think about the irony that it was him, a foxen man, saying that... considering the stereotypes. 'Sometimes being friends is better.'

'Oh... I like how that sounds,' Stars said slowly. Then she grinned, and her ears flicked up. 'What kind of men do you like to be myits with?'

'I don't know,' Ka'harja shrugged. 'Short?'

'Then you can have the men I don't want!' Stars decided, her cheerful optimism coming back in a rush as she clapped her hands.

Ka'harja laughed. Why not humour her? 'It's a deal.'

They stood together for a while, quietly thinking. Ka'harja chuckled when he saw she'd picked up her baby again. She was holding Little Demon with her lower arms and gently stroking them with one of her free hands.

'I like that it doesn't smell like dust here,' Stars said as she peered out the window again. 'I can still smell the dirt, but it doesn't smell burnt.'

'It's nice,' he agreed.

Stars took a deep breath and kissed her baby. 'Can you help me feed my Little Demon? I don't know how to with this thing on.'

'Sure.'

Ka'harja helped Stars adjust her backwards shirt so that she could feed Demon comfortably, then turned back to the window. Partly to be polite, but mostly because he didn't want to see it; he didn't like anything about the process and the less he witnessed, the better.

He waited a while, but the silence felt awkward, so he tried to think of something to say.

'What's your preference?' Ka'harja finally asked. 'Dominant hand, I mean. I'm ambidextrous.'

'Ambi... huh?'

'I use both my hands for things,' he clarified, glancing back at her and feeling relief when he saw that she'd stopped feeding Little Demon. 'Nurlak have lower and upper arm preferences, right? Which do you use?'

Stars stared at Ka'harja, confused, for what felt like a full minute before she lifted her upper hands and looked at them. Her eyes grew wide and her mouth opened in shock. 'I use my top arms.'

Ka'harja lost it at that. He laughed so hard he had to sit down on the kitchen floor again. His chest and stomach hurt and he couldn't breathe.

The whole time he laughed Stars watched him. She was frowning and looked offended, but Ka'harja couldn't stop himself.

*Her face!*

'Don't laugh at me!' Stars exclaimed as she stomped a foot angrily and folded back her ears. 'I'm tired of being laughed at! I don't want people to laugh at me anymore! Stop it right now! Broja'kar! *He'hen!*'

The hurt in her voice was all Ka'harja needed to hear. He stopped laughing and scrambled to his feet. 'Sorry,' he held out a hand to Stars. 'Friends?'

She hesitated, staring at him as her ears flicked back up and her voice came out in a mystified gasp. 'Are we friends?'

'Sure,' Ka'harja grinned. 'If you want to be.'

Her face lit up and she bolted out of the room. 'Kekik! I made a friend!'

'With who?' Ka'harja heard Dena respond through the wall. 'I hope it wasn't with *that boy!*'

Ka'harja frowned as he collected the bowls and lifted up the heavy pot of porridge. He made his way into the main room as Stars began twirling around her mother excitedly.

'It was! It was! My first friend outside of Heck'ne!'

‘Well, I suppose we have to start *somewhere*,’ Dena mumbled. She clenched her jaw when she saw Ka’harja was in the room and looked away awkwardly.

Ka’harja tried not to let it bother him. He put the pot on the table with a grunt and started filling bowls. ‘Do you want more, Stars?’

‘*More?!*’ Stars almost shouted. ‘Gighi! I’m allowed even *more?!*’

‘You can have as much as you like,’ Ka’harja told her. ‘Don’t worry about it. I’ll make more if you manage to empty the pot.’

Stars bounced up and down excitedly. ‘More! More! I want more! Broja’nikar!’

‘Don’t eat too much, my pebble,’ Dena reminded her. ‘You’re not used to eating a lot. I don’t want you making yourself sick. Kan slowly.’

‘Same goes for you, Kekik,’ Ka’harja laughed as he sat opposite the girls. ‘I mean, the eat as much as you want thing, not the don’t make yourself sick thing. Though you shouldn’t do that either.’

Dena gave a disgruntled *tsk* and turned her back on Ka’harja so she could continue to fuss over her daughter.

*Ridiculous*, Ka’harja rolled his eyes. He tried not to be offended, but it was hard; it wasn’t like he’d risked his life to give her, a *potential murderer*, food and shelter or anything like that! Ungrateful...

Stars was finished with her second bowl by the time Ka’harja managed to stop himself internally mocking Dena, who handed her daughter what was left of her own porridge.

‘Your kekik’s been asleep a long time,’ Stars said as she finished off her mother’s bowl. ‘She’s a very loud sleeper, and she snores like my gorg growls when he’s angry. Although I shouldn’t call him gorg. He hates it when I do and growls at me whenever he hears me say it, which I do a lot without thinking, so I hear him growl a lot. That’s how I know your kekik sounds like him. He only likes it when I call him by his name, which is Lah’kort, or if I call him my yalfit. That means father, if you didn’t know. Although you probably did, because you knew what kekik meant. But if you didn’t know before you know now, because I just told you and—’

Ka’harja nodded along patiently while Stars continued to talk. Though, he was only half paying attention, as nothing she said really made sense to him. He wasn’t sure whether it was appropriate to smile; Dena was watching her daughter with a severe expression and flinched every time Stars said the name “Lah’kort.”

Ka’harja’s own brow furrowed, as he thought on the name. *It sounded familiar, but he couldn’t place it.*

‘What’s the not-Har’py word for gorg?’ Stars asked, distracting him. ‘I never learnt that one.’

‘Brother,’ Ka’harja told her. He realised only a few seconds after saying it out loud that she’d referred to Lah’kort as both yalfit and gorg, and his eyes flicked to Dena. *Her own son?*

Dena looked at him and nodded, with a miserable expression and pleading eyes that begged him not to ask about it. Ka’harja shivered as he thought about what might have happened to him if he’d stayed in Heck’ne with his biological mother. He certainly wasn’t hunter material.... Would he have ended up like Dena?

The thought made him ill.

Luckily for them both, Stars changed the subject of conversation back to Distro's snoring which —as awkward a topic as it was— was a lot less awkward than Har'py family dynamics.

'My kekik doesn't sound like yours when she sleeps,' Stars said proudly. 'My kekik is a very quiet sleeper. Well, actually, she's quiet all the time. People can forget she's there because she barely ever talks! But I never forget her. I love her too much. Kosson.'

Dena gave a weak smile and kissed her daughter's cheek.

'So she's the opposite of you, then?' Ka'harja pushed his anxiety to the very back of his mind and smiled at Stars. 'With the never talking thing, I mean. You never seem to close your mouth!'

Stars stiffened, looking to the floor as she started to apologise, but then she stopped halfway through. 'Wait. You were smiling when you said that. Was it a joke?'

Ka'harja nodded. 'Of course it was! I don't insult my friends and actually *mean* it.'

'And *I'm* your friend!' Stars' eyes grew wide as if she had just remembered. Then she paused. 'Do you think our kekiks can be friends?'

'You know I don't like having friends,' Dena squeezed Stars' arm affectionately before adding, 'Besides you of course, my little carrot.'

'But you can make better friends now that we're free!' Stars exclaimed. 'Just like I'm doing!'

'That's enough for now, my precious one.'

'But kekik—'

'*I said that's enough!*' Dena's snap was followed by a tense silence. A moment passed before she sighed and kissed Stars on the forehead. 'I'm supposed to be the one looking after you. I don't want you worrying about me.'

'But I love you, Kekik,' a tear rolled down Stars' cheek and Ka'harja couldn't help feeling sorry for her.

Without thinking, he jumped out of his seat. 'You know what? This conversation is so awkward that I think waking my mother and explaining to her that I welcomed two Har'pies into our home while on a potion high is more appealing than sitting here and listening to it! So I will be *right* back!'

He turned around stiffly and marched towards the bed. He didn't bother to avoid the junk that had been thrown about the house the night before and simply kicked it away as he walked. When he got to the bed he plopped himself down heavily and gave his mother a shake, which she ignored.

'Mum, time to get up,' he shook her again. 'Mum! Up! Sunlight and breakfast await you. Time to get up! Wake up! Awaken!'

She didn't respond at all.

'WAKE UP!' Ka'harja shouted. But to no avail. Getting his mother up for breakfast was one of the hardest daily chores he'd ever been given. He might as well tip porridge on a brick. 'DISTRO NIGELLE! WAKE THE *FUCK* UP! MUM! DISTRO! MUM!'

She snorted and mumbled something before rolling over and burying her face in her pillow.

Sighing, Ka'harja climbed over her onto the other side of the bed and squashed himself between the wall and his mother. He braced himself, setting his feet against Distro and his back against the wall, and then heaved his legs straight.

His mother fell out of bed with a grunt, a *thunk*, and a mumbled "fuck off," but when Ka'harja checked on her she was still asleep.

'Impressive,' Dena chuckled. 'Is she alright?'

'Yeah, she's fine. It's all part of our daily routine!' Ka'harja grinned as he picked up one of Distro's abandoned bottles. 'This happens every morning!'

He waved the top of the bottle under Distro's nose and finally got a response out of her. She made a loud, wet snorting sound and attempted to sit up.

'Ka'harja? I have a headache,' she snorted again, this time from deep in her crackly chest. She opened her eyes, only to immediately close them again. 'Oh by the ninth god that's bright.'

Ka'harja chuckled as she gave a long wet sniff. 'Is that our new language now?'

'Yeah, it's hangover for hello,' she sniffed again and blinked her eyes slowly. 'Aren't you handsome today?'

'I'm handsome every day,' Ka'harja reminded her playfully. 'I'm sure our new guests would agree.'

'Guests?' Distro wiped her nose with her arm and gazed around with her swollen, half-open eyes. 'Who are they? They're not— IT'S NOT THE TRADERS IS IT?!'

Ka'harja put his arm around his mother as she curled into a ball, clutching her head and obviously regretting yelling with such a bad hangover.

'No, no, not the caravaners,' Ka'harja explained. He helped his mother to her feet and guided her to the table. 'They're like me.'

Distro stared blankly at the girls as Ka'harja sat her down. Dena looked nervous, but Stars started bouncing up and down excitedly when Distro's eyes met hers.

'They're nothing like you,' Distro said. 'They're too pale. And thin. And they're both girls. They look like— Oh. *Runaways?*'

Ka'harja nodded.

'Abbttoh! I'm Stars!' obviously unable to control herself any longer, Stars jumped onto the table and sat in front of Distro. 'I used to have a different name, but now my name is Stars because Ka'harja told me about the stars and the sky and grass and I really like them all but I really like stars a lot! Do you know about Scara? There are people called Animon who think she's a goddess with glowing hair and magical love! And did you know Har'pies say she's evil when Animon say she's not and is really good and full of love? I'm so excited to not be a Har'py anymore! Ka'harja's helping me to stop being one because he used to be one too but stopped so he knows how to stop being a Har'py and he's been telling me how and did you know he can speak Har'py? Can you speak Har'py too?'

Distro stared at Stars with eyes wider than Ka'harja had seen before. Her eyebrows were raised high and she didn't look like she was taking anything in.... Ka'harja supposed it didn't help that Stars started speaking Har'py to test if Distro could understand her.

Ka'harja was grinning ear-to-ear as his mother stared at Stars. He served

himself a bowl and finished it before Stars realised Distro *couldn't* speak Har'py (well, not enough to understand her, anyway) and started to talk in International again. Then he turned and started for the front door.

'Ka'harja, don't be rude!' his mother called to him. She sounded more desperate and confused than she did frustrated or angry. 'Get back here and eat your breakfast — Don't just walk away! *Ka'harja please come back, I don't know what's happening!*'

Ka'harja didn't stop; he just ignored his mother's protests and hurried outside. He stretched, laughed, then made a beeline for the outhouse.

# Chapter 7

## Walking Through the Front Door; The Nigelle Farmhouse

Glif 6<sup>th</sup>, Year 10,053 AE

By the time Ka'harja got back in the house Distro and Dena were sitting side by side, laughing and having a discussion about "how utterly useless men can be."

'I resent that,' Ka'harja chuckled as he came up behind his mother. He kissed the back of her head and reached across the table for more food.

Dena's attitude changed when she realised Ka'harja was in the room. She shuffled nervously and went quiet when Distro tried to start the conversation again. Instead, she stared at Little Demon, who slept peacefully in her arms.

'What's wrong? You alright?' Ka'harja asked. He knew that *he* was what was wrong, but was trying to be reassuring. 'Can I get you a drink?'

'Yes!' Distro interrupted. 'Check if we have any White Dragon Wine left would you, Sweetheart? If not then just grab some more Melberry. That stuff's cheap as water.'

'It basically *is* water,' Ka'harja snickered as he stepped over bottles and obediently made his way to the kitchen. He nearly collided with Stars on his way in, who lifted up armfuls of food and exclaimed happily that Distro was going to let her try everything in the house.

Ka'harja squeezed past her and started shuffling through the cupboards as she rambled on about how nice the food they had tasted. He didn't manage to find White Dragon *or* Melberry, but he found a few bottles of a drink called "Filgosh" pushed right to the back of one of the higher cupboards, which he figured must have been one of the bottles nicked from the travelling caravan. The label wasn't in International; it was some sort of chunky cursive that he didn't recognise (though, he thought he'd seen the style of writing before). He opened it and had a sip as Stars wandered up to his side.

It had a very strong mint flavour with a nutty aftertaste. It was, in Ka'harja's opinion, disgusting... and oddly chunky.

'Can I try that, too?' Stars asked.

'Sorry, not good when you're breast feeding,' Ka'harja pulled the bottle away

from her quick, curious hands. 'If you drink this, your milk might make Little Demon sick.'

Stars gasped loudly and ran out of the room. She dropped a loaf of bread on her way out so Ka'harja picked it up and followed her to the table (which she proceeded to sit on top of) and gently *thwapped* her on the head with it.

'Bread head,' Ka'harja chuckled. Stars was obviously confused, so he continued, 'This is called bread. I bopped you on the head with it. So you are now a bread head.'

'Don't confuse the poor girl,' Distro punched Ka'harja's arm. 'And give me my drink!'

'Alright, but don't overdo it like yesterday!' Ka'harja held the bottle out to his mother... but pulled it away when she reached for it. He did this several times, each time having to pull it away faster, before Distro managed to catch it. He still didn't let go and watched his mother struggle to pull the bottle away from him. She gave a victorious laugh when she won the tug-of-war and drunk without looking at the label. She gagged and spat it out almost as soon as the drink made contact with her lips.

'What the *fuck* is this?' Distro snapped. She stared at the label and then frowned. '*Filgosh?* This is cooking oil, Ka'harja!'

'Is it?' Ka'harja laughed. 'Sorry, I couldn't read the label and sort of just assumed any liquid in the house was alcohol.'

'It's fourteen years past its expiry date!' Distro cackled and handed it back. 'It must have been something my father made me take when I left home. Where in the world did you find it?'

'It was in the back of one of the top cupboards,' Ka'harja answered. He turned to Stars and held out the bottle. 'Hey Stars, turns out it won't make Little Demon sick if you drink it.'

'Don't drink it!' Distro slapped the bottle out of Ka'harja's hand before Stars could take it. 'It's gone bad! It'll make *you* sick!'

Stars looked hurt. 'Ka'harja, why would you want to make me sick?'

'Don't worry, hon, he doesn't *want* to make you sick,' Distro stared at the bottle as thick, chunky liquid pooled onto the floor. 'He's just an idiot who can't think things through.'

'*That's putting it lightly,*' Dena mumbled. She froze when everyone turned to her. 'Did I... say that out loud?'

'What have you got against me?' Ka'harja snapped and pointed a finger at Dena. 'No! Seriously? All I've done is try to *help* you!'

Dena refused to meet his eye. 'I.... I don't know. I'm sorry. Please don't.... Don't hit me.'

'I'm not going to hit you,' Ka'harja's chest tightened with a knot of frustration and he put his hand down slowly. He tried to remind himself to be patient.

'Dena, finish your breakfast,' Distro's voice sounded like it had been dragged across a gravel road. 'And Ka'harja, get me a drink. An actual drink. Listen to me! I sound a dying gargoyle!'

'Alright, I'll get you a drink,' Ka'harja said.

'And then clean up the mess you've made!'

Ka'harja got Distro her drink and then headed back into the kitchen. He didn't

feel up to dealing with tense conversation as he cleaned the spilt oil, so he sat against the wall and put his face in his knees. He sighed when he heard Stars start talking.

‘You rasp like I used to,’ Stars said, presumably to Distro. ‘When I was a just a berr, if it got cold, my throat used to swell up and I couldn’t breathe properly. I sounded just like you do! I still sound a little like that when I get thirsty, though, but not as mup as it used to be. And I used to know someone else who talked really funny, but he’s gone now. He left a long long time ago and I can’t remember his face anymore. He made me happy, and I wanted to be his friend. Yalfit was going to give me to him when he was old enough to want a myit, because he was the son of a really strong warrior that Yalfit wanted to impress, but then he ran away, so he kept me for himself—’

‘Carrot, that’s enough. Please talk about something else. *Anything else.*’

‘Oh— Okay...’ Stars sounded hurt, at her mother’s exhausted tone. ‘Mm.... What’s that rainbow on the wall? It is bal’hiki to a star. Uh, I mean... it *looks like* a star.’

‘That? That’s the Eight Star,’ Distro explained. ‘It’s a religion thing. Each section of the Eight Star is supposed to represent a different magic and god. It’s complicated.’

‘*That’s a lot of gods,*’ whispered Stars. Ka’harja had to strain to hear her. ‘Do they really exist?’

‘HAH! No,’ Distro laughed. Then she gave a cough and corrected herself. ‘Not that I think, anyway. Gods just don’t make sense to me.’

‘They don’t? I think they make sense,’ said Stars. ‘They make me feel... safer. I think. I’m not sure what words to use for the feeling they give me. Like everything going bad can be made good again. Even if it takes a long long time. Mup turning to mip.’

Ka’harja sighed as his mother chuckled.

‘Don’t laugh at me!’ Stars exclaimed.

Distro went quiet and Ka’harja strained to hear the hushed conversation. He thought he heard someone apologise but he wasn’t sure.

‘Well, to me, *magic* makes sense,’ Distro said suddenly. ‘Magic is always there; always has been and always will be. Even long after our kinds are gone, magic will still exist.’

‘Our leader says that magic was made by Scara, and that it’s mup and we shouldn’t use it,’ said Stars. ‘But I’m not sure what to think anymore. What do you think? Is magic mup?’

‘I think it’s just like anything else that exists in the world’ Distro answered. ‘Like a rock, or a stick. Neither of those things are going to jump up and start beating you by themselves; it’s about what the people who pick them up choose to use them for. They can use them to hit you, or to build a house. It’s not the rock or the stick’s fault if it’s used for hitting. It’s the person who uses it for hitting who’s bad, not the object.’

This was followed by another silence.

‘I think I like the Eight Star,’ Stars finally said. ‘It’s very pretty. I like how this picture of it uses real rocks to make it sparkle.’

Distro laughed. 'Ka'harja made it for me.'

'I like Ka'harja, too,' Stars said happily. 'And I really like you too, Kekik Distro. Can we live with you?'

Distro laughed, short and sharp. 'I don't think that's a good idea.'

'Why not?'

'Carrot...' Dena hesitated, then sighed. 'We're still too close to the border. We have to get as far away from Heck'ne as we can. All the way away.'

'That sounds like a very long walk. And I don't think I can walk much further.'

'Maybe. But maybe you won't have to,' Distro paused; probably to take a swig of her drink. 'There's a travelling caravan passing through. You could ask if they'd take you with them to wherever they're heading. I'm sure they'd be more than happy to help you!'

Ka'harja scoffed. After what he'd seen of the caravan, he wasn't sure it was a good idea to leave Stars with them. Not with Trat, at least. Baku seemed decent enough, but the others....

'What if they don't take us, Distro?' Dena sounded close to tears. 'What do we do then? We can't stay here.'

'If they won't take you, I'll offer them money. If *that* doesn't work we wait for another caravan to come through. There's some good friends of mine who come through every six or so months to give us mail and sell on my potion stock. They'll be coming by again soon, and they'd take you if I asked them to, but... getting you away from here as soon as possible would be best. Ka'harja can take you to the caravan when he **STOPS EAVESDROPPING FROM THE KITCHEN AND GETS HIS BUTT IN HERE!**'

Ka'harja jumped into the kitchen doorway. 'Great Star, Mum! You can't expect me to go back to the caravan after what I did last night?!'

Dena squinted and locked her four eyes on Ka'harja with a severe expression. 'What did you do last night?'

'Uh— No, nothing,' Ka'harja lied. 'I just meant that last night was such a long night for me, and I'm tired.'

Dena turned away. She obviously wasn't convinced by Ka'harja's lame excuse.

'You're a really bad liar,' Stars piped up. 'I know you're telling a maka. Why don't you want to go to the caravan? Is it an animal? Is it dangerous? I won't go to it if it's dangerous! It might hurt my Little Demon!'

Distro put a hand on Stars' knee—the only part of Stars she could reach while she was sitting on the table—and tried to comfort her. 'It's not an animal, it's just a couple of nomadic secas and their guards.'

'Nomadic secas?' Stars cocked her head and twitched an ear. 'I know what secas are, I've heard about them from other Har'pies, but what is nomadic? Is it a religion like Animon?'

Ka'harja shook his head. 'It's just a word used to describe someone who travels around a lot.'

Stars seemed to think for a moment before a huge grin spread across her face. 'Like I'm going to!'

'You could become a nomad, I suppose,' Distro's eyes darted from Stars to Dena

and back. 'But I wouldn't recommend travelling alone. There are lots of people out there who might hurt you.'

'Of course there are!' Stars exclaimed. 'That's why we're running away. I don't think many people can be as mean as Lah'kort, though. So even if I meet someone who wants to hurt me, they won't do a very good job. Because I'm used to being hurt really bad, and nobody can hurt people as bad as Lah'kort can, and Lah'kort was the one hurting me. So if someone tries to hurt me it won't be a big deal.'

'You're probably right,' Ka'harja heaved himself onto the table so he could sit next to Stars. 'But you being able to cope with pain isn't an excuse for people to hurt you.'

'I know, and it's okay,' Stars pet Ka'harja on the shoulder and grinned. 'If someone tries to hurt me or my Little Demon, I'll kill them.'

'What a *simple* solution,' Distro crackled. She coughed a laugh and then turned to Dena. 'Have either of you ever killed anyone before?'

'Yi,' said Dena.

'Na,' said Stars.

'Yikes,' said Ka'harja. 'Remind me not to get on your bad side, Kekik.'

'I think you're already on her bad side,' Distro cackled loudly. 'Alright. Let's start packing and get you to the caravan.'

'Packing?' Stars echoed curiously. 'What are we packing? We can't take this place with us like our troop usually does when we move, it's too big and solid. We could never fold it up like our sleeping hovels in Heck'ne.'

'We're going to give you some clothes,' Ka'harja told her gently. 'You'd fit in most of my old stuff, if I cut arm holes in it like the shirt you're wearing now.'

'But I already have clothes,' Stars pulled on her shirt happily. 'You gave me these yesterday!'

'You're going to need to wash them,' Ka'harja told her. 'You can't wear them while they're wet, and you can't just walk around naked.'

'I walk around naked all the time,' Stars stared at Ka'harja with a confused look and flicked one of her ears.

*Same*, thought Ka'harja, though he kept that to himself. 'It's impolite to be naked when you're with strangers. So if you're going to be leaving with the caravaners you're going to want a second set of clothes.'

'You're being very nice to me,' Stars smiled. 'I'm not used to people being nice to me.'

'Well, *get* used to it!' Ka'harja met Stars' eyes and grinned. He'd only known Stars for a day —less than— but she already somehow felt a little closer to him than people he'd known for years.... Although, to be fair, the people he'd known for years were his mother's friends and clients; mostly people he wouldn't have chosen to be social with. As much as he cared for some of them, they were his mother's social circle, not his.

'Ka'harja, I have a question,' Stars shifted in place nervously. 'I don't want to upset you by asking, but you said....'

'Go on,' Ka'harja gave her a gentle shove as she trailed off. 'I won't get upset. What did I say?'

'You said it's rude to walk around naked, but when we first met, you were naked... and now, you're barely wearing anything. All you have on is those.'

Ka'harja glanced down at his tattered shorts and chuckled. 'This is what I usually wear around the house,' he explained. 'But I could put on a shirt if you'd like.'

'I don't mind, but what about when we first met? You said it was rude to be naked around strangers, but when we first met we were strangers, and you were naked.'

'Well I wasn't expecting to meet anyone, was I?' Ka'harja gave a nervous laugh. He couldn't explain the *actual* reason he'd been naked. 'And—'

'Here you go!' Distro exclaimed from the kitchen doorway.

Distro's shout had cut Ka'harja off and he stared at her, wondering when she'd gotten out of her chair.

Two large shoulder bags were slung over Distro's shoulders as she stumbled into the room. 'Food, water, clothes, money, and sleeping potions. That should be all you need.'

'Sleeping potions?' Dena commented. 'What are those for?'

'Sleeping,' Ka'harja snickered. He stopped when Distro rolled her eyes at him.

'I've never met a runaway who didn't have nightmares,' Distro said gently. 'The potions should help you both sleep easier. Just a mouthful before you lie down and you should be fine. I'm sorry I can't give you more. *Someone* recently raided my pantry and used up all my stock.'

Ka'harja gave a cough and looked away from his mother; realising she hadn't forgotten how he'd escaped the night before. As he did, Stars smiled widely and took her bag from Distro.

'This is more than I've ever been given in my *entire life*! Eewowm!'

'You should both get going before the caravan leaves,' said Distro, fiddling with her ear.

Ka'harja grinned when he saw she was wearing the earring he'd given her. It was like the necklace she'd given him; with a cutting of his hair attached so they'd never feel alone—

'Ka'harja will take you now, won't you, Sweetheart?'

His grin disappeared and anxiety gripped his chest like sharp talons squeezing a mouse. 'Yeah, sure.'

# Chapter 8

## Back the Way They'd Come; The Nigelle Farm Glif 6<sup>th</sup>, Year 10,053 AE

The air outside was a lot warmer than the night before, though it was still cold. Flying bugs narrowly avoided eyes and crickets chirped somewhere in the damp grass as Ka'harja and the girls made their way across the field.

They were going a different way than Ka'harja had gone before; it was a little longer but it avoided the Heck'ne border completely, which made everyone much happier.

'The Har'py religion is something else,' Ka'harja flicked the morning's dew from his tail. 'I'll never get over the fact that it's named after the harpy race that started it. They could have called it anything else; but no. They had to make things confusing for the rest of us.'

'I know!' Stars exclaimed as she chased the bugs that rose from the grass. 'It's so hard to tell which one people are talking about! You can think they're talking about the religion and think that you're going hunting with another nurlak, and then you get actual harpies with sharp feet and teeth and wings that take your food and call you hakalika, and it's stupid and it sucks! Mup mup.'

'Calm down, carrot,' Dena caught her daughter as she ran past. 'You're going to upset the baby running around like that, let me hold it.'

Stars' paused, her entire demeanour changing as she gently passed her baby over to Dena. She kissed Little Demon on the nose, checked that they were still asleep, and then started her erratic sprinting around the field again. She stumbled once or twice but it didn't deter her from her fun.

'Be careful of hills and holes!' Ka'harja called after her as she passed. 'She's full of energy, isn't she?'

'She's usually like this after eating,' Dena smiled, then realised who she was talking to and frowned. 'She's gotten overexcited because of how much you gave her.'

Ka'harja shrugged. 'Alak bwob, Kekik. Let her have her fun.'

'It's *alík bwab*,' Dena grumbled. 'And I am *not* being unreasonable! She's going to hurt herself— Oh Zen'efay, where is she now?'

Ka'harja shrugged and looked around. They were in a hilly part of Okatoko so it

wasn't surprising that Stars had disappeared from view. 'She won't be far, stop stressing—'

'KEKIK! KA'HARJA!' Stars' shriek cut through the air and both Ka'harja and Dena's ears shot up to pinpoint the direction of the shout.

Dena was the first to move; she bolted over a nearby hill, calling out to her daughter.

Ka'harja hesitated, swallowing the lump of anxiety that had blocked his throat before he followed Dena.

As they came to the top of the rise Ka'harja spotted Stars. She was backing slowly away from a pair of foxen women.

*Koko*, Ka'harja remembered from last night. The bad-tempered foxen woman who'd gotten into a fight with one of her fellow guards. Ka'harja didn't recognise the other woman, but she looked terrified and was hiding behind Koko with wide eyes and a fluffed-out tail. Ka'harja stopped for a moment, taking in the woman's frazzled magenta hair, before he shouted to her and Koko, 'HEY! Leave her alone!'

'What are you doing here, *scum*?' Koko snapped at Ka'harja as he came to a stop between her and Stars. She looked even more threatening than the night before, now that Ka'harja could get a good look at her. Her half-healed bruises were deep and purple on her dark skin and her irises were such a pale grey it looked like she'd rolled her eyes all the way around and drawn on new pupils. She held up a fist when Ka'harja didn't respond. 'Har'pies aren't welcome here!'

'Do I *look* like a damn Har'py?!' Ka'harja replied. He tried desperately to stop his voice from breaking, but he heard it tremble and had to swallow the lump in his throat. 'I'm Ka'harja Nigelle, and I should be asking *you* what *you're* doing here, and why you're telling people if they are or aren't welcome! I mean, seeing as my mother *owns* this part of Okatako I think it's me and her who should be deciding who can and can't be here!'

'This part of Okatako is—'

'Three kilometre's inside the Nigelle farm border!' Ka'harja interrupted. His voice was higher than he would have liked it to be but he pushed down his fears and continued, 'The fence by the river marks the stop to our land, and you're on the West side. Ergo, on Distro Nigelle's land! And if Distro Nigelle wants to let Har'pies on her land, then you have no right to be kicking them off.'

Koko frowned. 'And does this *Distro Nigelle* want these Har'pies on her land?'

'She gave us breakfast!' Stars blurted. 'And told us to meet the caravan and ask for help. Do you know where the caravan is?'

'We *are* the caravan,' the second foxen stepped out from behind Koko. She flicked her tail nervously and twitched an ear as she continued. 'Koko, I think we should talk to Sken about this.'

'*You are the caravan?*' Stars turned the thought over in her mind. After a moment of confused silence, Stars jumped in a sudden panic; trembling from head to toe as she backed away. 'Ka'harja, I don't like the caravan! They're *lenta*! I want to wait for the other people! Please let us stay with you! I don't want to be with these mup people!'

'Now look what's happened,' Dena hissed to Ka'harja. 'I *knew* we'd have been

better off just going our own way.’

Ka’harja ignored her. ‘Stars, you can’t stay. You’re not safe here and you know that.’

‘Lah’kort will be looking for us,’ Dena grabbed her daughter’s hands in her own. ‘You know what he’ll do if he finds us.... If he finds Little Demon. Lah’kort zi’kaf tarr.’

*Lah’kort will kill them.*

The thought sent a shiver down Ka’harja’s spine, but not as much as Stars’ mournful cry did as she put her face in a hand and doubled over.

It was then that Koko’s companion dared a step towards Har’pies, who both took two steps back.

Ka’harja smelt, as she moved past him, the two distinctive scents of onions and oil. It was an unbearably strong smell, as if she’d rubbed onion powder in her hair and drunk nothing but vegetable oil for six months, and his eyes watered slightly.

He realised this must be Coborn, and understood why Lif and Trat had ungraciously nicknamed her “*onion girl*.”

‘You have a baby,’ it was a statement, not a question. ‘They’re very cute....’

‘Yi,’ Stars pressed her ears down and gave a low growl. Then she bared her teeth and snarled, ‘If you try to hurt it I’ll hurt you back!’

Coborn flinched and edged behind Koko again, obviously shaken by Stars’ tone. She rubbed her neck anxiously and Ka’harja saw she had a tattoo on her collarbone, though he couldn’t tell what it was past her thumb. ‘I would never hurt anyone, especially a baby.’

‘Of course you wouldn’t, you don’t have the guts to do *anything*,’ Koko grumbled. ‘This is *exactly* what I was talking about! You’re too damn soft!’

Coborn pressed down her ears, but didn’t make a retort. Instead, she looked Ka’harja up and down as if she’d only just realised how unusually tall he was. Ka’harja looked back at her and flicked his own ear, trying to seem casual and confident; though as he met Coborn’s eye he knew he must have looked as terrified as she did.

‘Soft is good. I like soft things,’ Stars said with a distracted sigh. ‘If you fall on something soft it doesn’t hurt.’

‘Coborn, why don’t you go do your usual thing and burn some more fish?’ Koko gave her companion a shove. ‘I’ll deal with them.’

‘But Koko I—’

‘Grease fingers! Go!’

Coborn’s mouth snapped shut as she looked from person to person. Ka’harja saw she had tears in her eyes before she turned and hurried away.

‘Aren’t you lovely?’ Ka’harja snorted. ‘Do you treat everyone like that, or just your friends?’

Koko smiled the least genuine smile Ka’harja had ever seen in his life. She was obviously trying to make her disdain of the trio clear as she continued, ‘So what kind of help was it that you wanted from us? You said something about not being able to stay? I don’t know if our caravan would be very welcoming of the idea of bringing Har’pies with us on our travels. None of us are fans of cannibals and rapists, you see?’

‘Of course, but that would be up to your boss, wouldn’t it? You don’t really get a say in the matter,’ Ka’harja fake-grinned back. ‘I think *grease fingers* mentioned

talking to someone called Sken?’

‘Sken doesn’t like to be bothered,’ the fake-grin slid off Koko’s face and she glared at Ka’harja with a look so fierce he instinctively turned away; only to be met with Dena’s own hateful stare that convinced him to turn back to Koko as she spoke. ‘And I doubt she’d enjoy being disturbed so some stranger could ask her a favour.’

‘And I doubt the Okatako guard would like to hear about trespassers assaulting the guests of the local potion-maker.’

‘Local? The closest town is three weeks away!’

‘Everything in Okatako is three weeks away! I *demand* to speak to your boss, or I’ll send a complaint to Kokakota and have your trespassing stopped! Forcefully, if need be.’

Koko looked Ka’harja in the eye and slowly let go of the bow on her belt as Ka’harja tried to not let his anxiety get the better of him. He was sure his fear was showing—he’d never been good at hiding his emotions— but he met Koko’s gaze as best he could and stared her down.

‘*Are you okay, Ka’harja?*’ Stars asked in a half-whisper, breaking the tense silence and making Ka’harja jump. ‘*You look upset.*’

‘Fine,’ Koko turned away from the group. ‘Alright! If you *demand* to meet Sken, so be it!’

# Chapter 9

## The Caravan's Campsite; The Nigelle Farm Glif 6<sup>th</sup>, Year 10,053 AE

The caravan was different during the day. All the times Ka'harja had seen it had been at night when it had seemed grey and menacing and big. Now it was bright and lively, and seemed more compact and lived-in. All but the newest of the caravans were made from stained off-white fabric with coloured trims that seemed dirtier and more homely than Ka'harja had originally thought they were.

It was obvious the caravan had been packing up to leave until Coborn, who stood crying in the middle of six more foxens (who were attempting, but failing, to comfort her), had returned and burst into tears.

Coborn pointed as the group came over a hill and the caravaners that crowded her stared anxiously. At their guests, or at Koko, Ka'harja couldn't be sure.

Koko strut straight towards them and they all stepped back to let her and her guests through.

Ka'harja recognised four of the six; Baku, Trat, Lif, and Felelor. He assumed the jittery man clinging to Felelor's arm and whispering "*oh good Goddess oh good Goddess actual real life Har'pies Felelor what do we do,*" was Naranako. He had no idea who the last man was, but he had what looked like a dragon bite-mark on his shoulder.

For a moment Ka'harja took in the group. They were all so... average. So normal looking. He'd never really wanted to think of them as people before. He'd always tried to push the idea that they were living, breathing Sentients out of his head.... But now he could see it all too clearly; from Trat's dark scars to Lif's beer gut to Naranako's twitching tail. They were just so *normal*.

Quickly glancing around, Ka'harja realised the only person he couldn't see now was the man who'd been groaning over the medical scrolls. He assumed that he was asleep after such a long night. Or studying more scrolls. He seemed like a busy person.

'Be polite. Be respectful. Do *not* speak out of turn.... And for the love of the Goddess, whatever you do, don't upset her wife.'

Ka'harja didn't really care for anything Koko had to say and just rolled his eyes

as she listed the rules for meeting her boss. He wanted to stop Stars from nodding along and agreeing to everything she said but he figured that if Stars *did* end up going with the caravan, she'd need to understand what was expected of her. So he bit his tongue and followed obediently.

Koko made a beeline for the red-accented caravan and rapped on the door several times.

A few moments later the door was opened and a half-dressed seces stared down at the group.

She was very intimidating, Ka'harja thought. Her skin was a night-sky blue that was dotted with white freckles and sliced with deep pink scars that made her look like a tiger.... At least on the left side of her body. Her entire right side was scarred that same bright pink, like her skin and fins had been scraped off and grown back wrong.

She flicked the dangerous-looking barb on her tail and frowned. 'Koko, who are these peop—'

'I thought it was rude to be naked around strangers!' Stars blurted loudly to Ka'harja. 'Why does she get to be shirtless if I can't? That's not fair at all!'

There was a moment of tense quiet before the woman started laughing. 'I'm wearing as much as any seces needs to wear,' she said with a shark-tooth grin. 'Come in.'

Stars was the first to go inside; she didn't hesitate to follow the seces and disappeared through the door. As Dena followed her, Ka'harja heard Stars exclaim loudly: 'That's not fair either!'

He hurried in and saw another seces, bright green like mint leaves and with deep blue freckles, pulling on a tight pair of pants and giggling. Her cheeks were flushed and her tail waved behind her excitedly as she reached for her belt and turned to the newcomers.

'I'm Annanyn,' she greeted happily. Her eyes fell on Little Demon and her gills lifted with a loud squeal of air. Her too-close freckles brightened and blurred together, making her skin look spotted as she covered her mouth and bobbed up and down with excitement. 'Is that a baby?! Can I hold them? Oh, please can I hold them?'

Ka'harja blinked dumbly at her. He'd never actually seen a seces up close.... His mother hadn't been joking when she'd said that they talked through their gills. He was having enough trouble understanding Annanyn as she rambled on as fast as Stars could respond *without* her hiss-like voice echoing through the sides of her neck.

He frowned at her as she latched up her belt—which he didn't think she needed, what with her pants being so tight—and watched as she ever-so-gently took Little Demon from Stars and cradled them in her arms.

'You're so lucky,' she said with a wistful sigh. 'Such a beautiful little baby—'

Ka'harja's eavesdropping was interrupted by a giant, slime-coated dog that saw fit to tackle him to the ground and lick his face. Ka'harja heard himself scream far too late to stop himself and tried to roll away from the beast.

'TUCKER! SIT!' Sken shouted.

The beast hung its head, letting out a squeak-like whine from its fish gills, and retreated to the corner of the room.

‘Sorry, you know how *incarahs* are!’

‘I didn’t even know there was such a thing as an *incarah*,’ Ka’harja tried not to slip in the slime as he got to his feet. He wanted to scream; he was coated in disgusting, snot-like goo from the dog-fish. He hated slime more than anything else in the world!

‘So, what’s your business here?’ Sken asked. ‘Are you looking to trade? And what’s with the Har’pies? You hire them as your personal guard or something?’

Ka’harja turned to Sken and stared at her. After meeting Koko, he hadn’t expected Sken to be so friendly. More than that, it was unusual that he got to talk to someone who could look him in the eye.

Sken was only a few inches taller than he was, and Annanyn only a few inches shorter. It threw him off, to say the least, and he blinked; taken aback by the oddity. Then he looked around the room dumbly, as if expecting her to be talking to someone else. When he realised she *was* talking to him his mind went blank and he couldn’t remember why he’d come to meet her; so he tried to find something to talk about.

He couldn’t help but notice that Sken was leaning on a smooth wooden tub of murky water; grinning as she dipped her hand in and out and rubbed it on her gills.

‘Is that your bed?’ he blurted.

‘Yes,’ Sken chuckled. It was genuine —if not a little shrill through the gills and more like a nasal squeak than a laugh— and Ka’harja relaxed a little. ‘It’s not for sale.’

‘No, no!’ Ka’harja grinned back. ‘I’m Ka’harja and I, uh... well—’

‘*Apparently* his mother owns this land, and they’re wanting to file a formal complaint to Kokakota officials about trespassing,’ Koko interrupted with a hiss. ‘Although I can’t say I’ve ever heard of this “Distro Nigelle” before. I think he’s lying.’

Sken nodded to Koko and raised her brow. ‘This is Empire land, isn’t it? Free for all Alliance citizens to travel?’

‘Not on the West side of the fence,’ Ka’harja explained, feeling a little more confident as his memory was jogged. ‘By the river. You’re on private property.’

‘I don’t remember seeing any fe—’ for a moment, Sken paused. Then her gills flared up and she let out an ear-piercing screech that sounded like some sort of horrible demonic laughter. ‘Do you mean to tell me those rotted wooden poles by the river are supposed to be a *fence*?’

‘In my defence; there’s only two of us maintaining a thousand acres,’ Ka’harja shrugged.

Sken crossed her arms and grinned. ‘That’s a lot of land, how’d you afford that?’

‘Land is cheap here; nobody wants to live near Heck’ne,’ Ka’harja pulled Dena close and rested his elbow on her head. ‘Not even Har’pies want to live near Heck’ne!’

Dena let out a growl and Ka’harja immediately realised he’d made a mistake.

He didn’t have time to remove his arm before Dena grabbed it, twisting it violently behind his back and shouting:

‘*I WARNED YOU!* I warned you not to touch me!’

Ka’harja heard himself squeal loudly as Dena let his wrist go and kicked him to the ground. He was immediately slobbered on by Tucker, who Sken yanked away and dragged to the caravan’s door.

‘Oh, I like *her*,’ Koko grinned and ran a finger through a curl in her hair. ‘What’s

your name, again?’

Stars crouched down beside Ka’harja, blocking his view of everything except her legs. ‘Are you alright, Ka’harja?’

‘I’m fine,’ Ka’harja grumbled as Stars helped him to his feet. ‘Your kekik is *VERY HATEFUL WOMAN!*’

Dena turned at his shout and glared at him, and Ka’harja hid behind Stars.

‘Kekik, please don’t miita my friend,’ Stars said sadly. ‘I really don’t want two people I love to fight with each other.’

Dena sighed and shook her head slowly before turning away. ‘I’ll be nicer to your next friend, I promise.’

‘You better be!’ Stars exclaimed. ‘Because she said she’s going to help me look after Little Demon! And I don’t want you to be mean to her because she’s going to help us and let us go with her, and it would be really ungrateful of you to be mean to her like you are to Ka’harja when she’s being so nice!’

Sken, who had shut Tucker out of the caravan and turned to watch the argument, tapped her chin and shook her head. ‘Annanyn, I thought we agreed to make these sorts of decisions together.’

‘I thought it would be alright,’ Annanyn shrugged as she passed Little Demon to Dena. ‘Besides, she’s willing to work in return for food and a place to sleep.’

Ka’harja was shocked. He didn’t think Stars would have suggested something like that. He wasn’t sure she fully understood what work out here *meant*... but he tried to shrug it off. If she could survive being a slave in Heck’ne, she could handle a secas caravan with what seemed like good intentions.

‘I’m not very good at many things,’ Stars warned. ‘But I’ll try and learn and help with whatever you want me to do. Kami mip kimpit, even if I’m hakalika.’

‘We can’t leave her, Sken,’ Annanyn took Sken’s hands in hers and tilted her head. It took a lot for Ka’harja not to laugh at her deliberately over-the-top, supposed-to-be cute voice as she continued: ‘*Pwease, kelp knot? Pwetty pwetty pwease* can she come?’

‘Alright, alright, you win!’ Sken untangled her wife’s tail from her waist and nodded to Stars. ‘I *will* expect you to make good on that promise, though.’

‘Thank woo, Skenny-kins,’ Annanyn wrapped her arms around Sken and kissed her chest.

‘I said you *won*,’ Sken put an arm around Annanyn and returned the kiss by nipping her firmly on the cheek. ‘So stop using that *awful* voice!’

Annanyn broke into a fit of giggles and winked at Ka’harja as Sken shoved her away.

Ka’harja felt himself smile. Sken and Annanyn looked really good together. He hoped he could find a guy he could be that happy with one day.... Although, that would involve meeting people. And he didn’t really like doing that.

‘So, not to pry,’ Sken’s voice made Ka’harja jump. ‘But I *do* have to know, what’s your backstory?’

‘Our backstory?’ Stars blinked. ‘Do you mean why we’re here?’

‘Yes, what happened? Why are you leaving Heck’ne?’

‘Our troop doesn’t like tia’fio children,’ Dena explained. ‘When Neg— Um....’

When *Stars* had her baby we had to leave or it would have been killed—’

‘He,’ *Stars* interrupted. ‘*Annanyn* said *Little Demon* is a he.’

‘We had to leave or *he* would have been killed,’ *Dena* corrected herself. ‘And even if we went back now and let them kill him, I don’t think I’d be allowed to live, either.’

‘Why not?’ *Sken* asked.

‘She *kasa* *Kay’oten* on the head with a rock so she couldn’t follow us!’ *Stars* blurted.

*Ka’harja* inhaled so sharply he choked on his own spit.

‘*Kay’oten?*’ he gagged. ‘*Kay’oten* as in *Pert’ana and Kay’oten?*’

*Stars* flicked up her ears with curiosity. ‘Have you met them?’

‘I— They’re my *parents*,’ *Ka’harja*’s mouth went dry and he could barely speak. *He was right! They were from his old troop!*

‘*That’s* where I know you from!’ *Dena* gasped and pointed at *Ka’harja* in an almost threatening way. ‘You’re *Kay’oten*’s son! How did I not realise? You look exactly like her! You didn’t even change your name how could I— How could I have forgotten you?!’

‘I don’t think he looks like *Kay’oten*,’ *Stars* said plainly. ‘His smile is too big. I think that’s why we didn’t recognise him! He’s changed a lot. Last time I saw him he was crying and covered in blood and had a bone in his leg. His voice has gotten better, too! Just like mine has.’

A sudden wave of realisation washed over *Ka’harja* and he let out a loud shout. ‘YOU! You’re the girl who let me go!’

‘I think we’re missing something here,’ *Sken* sucked her gills down and elbowed *Koko*.

‘Context, maybe?’ responded *Koko*. ‘Hey, *Ka’harja*! I thought you said your mother was called *Distro*! I *knew* you were lying.’

‘I wasn’t lying!’ *Ka’harja* snapped. ‘Ever heard of adoption before? Or do you just stuff your unwanted spawn back in?’

*Koko* started to argue but was cut off by *Sken*’s screeching laugh.

‘Now *that’s* an image!’ *Sken* exclaimed as she doubled over. ‘Stuff it back in! *Annanyn* did you hear that?’

‘I heard it,’ obviously unimpressed, *Annanyn* rolled her eyes. ‘It was crude.’

*Sken* pet *Annanyn*’s shoulder. ‘You mean hilarious!’

‘Disrespectful little shit!’ *Koko* snapped, her blush matching her bruises. ‘I should— I’m going to— FUCK YOU!’

‘You can’t fuck him, he’s gay,’ *Stars* said, clearly misunderstanding *Koko*’s exclamation. ‘He doesn’t like girls.’

*Koko* turned to snap at *Stars*, but stopped when she saw her face. *Stars* looked proud of herself... but in a nervous way; as if she wasn’t completely sure she’d said the right thing but was hoping she had.

It reminded *Ka’harja* of a time in his childhood when he’d been desperate to prove to *Distro* he was ready to be her thieving apprentice. He’d stacked chairs in order to reach a high shelf in the kitchen where *Distro* kept a small supply of gold coins. He’d almost had the coins when *Distro* had walked in. He’d held his breath then

and pulled a very similar face to the one Stars was pulling now; he'd been hoping for praise and compliments on how smart and resourceful he'd been, instead of being scolded for ignoring Distro's orders.

Ka'harja was never sure what Distro had opened her mouth to say that night as he'd promptly lost his balance, fallen, and knocked himself unconscious.

He wasn't going to let Stars be scolded for something as trivial as misinterpreting an insult. He couldn't.

'She's right, I'm gay,' Ka'harja tried to laugh. It was obviously fake but it made Stars smile from ear to ear.

'Yes! He's gay!'

Koko shrugged and turned to Sken. 'So... apparently he's gay.'

'Are you okay?' Annanyn put her hand on Dena's shoulder and she jumped.

Until Annanyn had disturbed her, Dena had been staring at Ka'harja with wide, terrified eyes. Her mouth still hung open now as she looked around nervously, her jaw trembling. She twitched an ear and turned back to Ka'harja. 'Good for you,' she finally managed.

Sken smacked Ka'harja on the back. He nearly fell over with the force of her slap. 'Yeah, good for you!' she teased.

'Thanks,' Ka'harja's cheeks blushed hot. He really wished Stars hadn't blurted out his sexuality but there was no way to take it back now. He tried to change the subject. 'And thanks for agreeing to take the girls.'

'No worries!' Sken gave a terrifying grin and Ka'harja tried not to imagine how much it would hurt to be bitten by those sharp, sharp teeth. 'The way I see it, as long as the girls are willing to do a little bit of work to keep things running smoothly, there's no reason we can't give them a hand!'

'What kind of work will we be doing?' Stars asked. 'I'm not very strong or fast, but I have a lot of patience and I like to learn things! I'm very good at building hovels out of sticks and mud and fur! Mine always last the longest when we travel, everyone else's always fall down after three or four weeks, but *mine* can last months! Although, you have these nice big wooden things. They seem very strong and don't look like they're going to fall down anytime soon. How do you move them? They're too big to carry. Your troop must be very strong. You are at least, Sken! You have big muscles! I think you'd even be able to beat Reak'nak in a fight! Do you move everything yourself? You look strong enough to carry one of these things around! I don't think I'd be able to carry much around. I'm not sure what I'll be able to do for you, because I'm not very good at much. Maybe I could help burn Coborn's fish! I'm very good at burning things. Whatever you make me do though, I promise I'll try *really* hard. Also, is it okay if I sometimes do Kekik's work? She gets very tired and sometimes she has trouble doing things. I'll work extra hard if it means Kekik can rest—'

For the first time since they'd come into the caravan, Sken wasn't smiling. She looked horrified. She turned to Koko and mouthed: *she won't stop*.

Koko's ears were flattened down as she tried to block out Stars' voice. 'Is this normal for her, or should we be worried?'

'Nah, she does this all the time,' Ka'harja grinned. His gaze met Koko's and he felt almost victorious as he watched Koko suffer. She deserved it for insulting his

mother.

Stars hurried over to Sken. She was in the middle of a sentence, but nobody seemed to be listening... except for Annanyn.

'STARS, NO!' Annanyn shrieked as Stars planted her palm firmly on the scarred side of Sken's face.

'—it's very pink,' she finished. There was an awkward pause before Stars pulled away with a shout. 'It feels like spit! It feels like really awful spit from the back of your throat when you're sick! Are you sick?'

Sken looked at her blankly. 'No that's... that's how all secas skin feels.'

'It's disgusting,' Stars said simply. 'Is it uncomfortable?'

'No, but the racism is,' Sken frowned and rolled her eyes.

'What's racism?'

'Well, uh, I guess I'll head off then,' Ka'harja flicked his tail. He was anxious to get out of the crowded caravan and back to his mother. 'Try not to be too offensive, Stars.'

'Oh!' Stars waved happily to Ka'harja as he hopped out of the caravan. 'Bye Ka'harja! See you tonight!'

He didn't have the heart to tell her that was very, very unlikely. So instead he gave her a friendly wave and walked away.

Ka'harja hoped to get home before too long. He hated the idea of leaving his mother half-sober. Perhaps he could put all the drink on the higher shelves so she couldn't reach them.... No; she'd find a way to get to it. And probably hurt herself while doing so—

'Afternoon, my friend! I heard you and your companions were talking to Sken? What about? All good news I hope!'

Ka'harja nearly jumped out of his skin when he heard Baku's voice calling out. He forced himself to smile and turned to face the guard. 'Just asking for a bit of help for the girls. No need to worry, Baku.'

As soon as the name escaped his mouth Ka'harja's chest tightened and he felt the uncontrollable urge to backflip into the sun and die. He couldn't believe he'd let that slip!

Baku just stared at Ka'harja and frowned. 'Have we met?'

'Yes!' Ka'harja lied. His voice broke with fear and he gave a quick cough, which he pretended was a badly-timed sneeze. 'We met last year. Don't you remember me?'

Luckily Baku seemed to think Ka'harja had been offended and not terrified. He glanced at his feet before apologising. 'Ah, sorry. I'm usually real good with faces. I can't think of how I'd forget yours; it's very unique.'

Ka'harja shrugged and tried to laugh. 'You were pretty drunk, I'm not surprised you don't remember.'

'Ah! That would explain it,' an uneven grin spread across Baku's face, squashing his scars until they looked like age lines on his otherwise young face. 'I wouldn't have thought I'd forget a man like you! But I suppose I wouldn't remember forgetting, would I?'

Ka'harja laughed. *That was relatable.*

‘I have to get back to work —the caravan’s leaving soon— but I hope we see each other again next year.’

Smiling back awkwardly, Ka’harja gave Baku a nod. He figured Baku was the sort of guy to draw attention to himself and in a panicked attempt to make his story more believable, he took a gamble. ‘Right, and you can do that party trick again.’

‘The one with the two bottles and the chikchik? Sure!’ with a wave, Baku turned and strutted away.

Ka’harja walked as calmly as he could until he was out of the caravan’s sight.... Then he sprinted away as fast as he could in the direction of his house. He ran until he tripped and fell into a hole. Too exhausted to pull himself out from the small incline, he instead opted to sob into the grass and call himself an idiot.

How could he have been so stupid? He nearly got himself caught! He felt like he was going to throw up.

He closed his eyes and could see the entire scene unfold in his mind; with a different ending where he’d said the wrong thing and been stabbed on the spot. Different outcomes played in his head over and over like some anxiety-induced vision of his could-have-been death.

He sat trembling in the hole for what could have been anywhere between five minutes and five hours before he was finally able to calm himself down. Then he rolled over onto his back and took a deep, relaxing breath.

Now that his panic was starting to ebb, he couldn’t help but wonder: *what sort of party trick could you do with two bottles and a chikchik?*

He was staring up at the sky, wondering what Baku could have possibly meant, when he saw dark clouds of smoke start to float overhead.

Ka’harja sat up. Was the smoke... coming from the direction of his house?

*Oh, Great Star, no!* All of Ka’harja’s exhaustion was replaced with panic. He jumped to his feet, his aching body forgotten as he raced home. *Mum!*

It was the fastest he’d ever run before. The land around him was a blur as he sped towards his house. And with every step, the blur got darker and more smoke-coated and Ka’harja’s panic continued to rise.

When he saw his house he let out an explosive shriek and was so shocked he forgot to stop running. He would have slammed into the door had it been on its hinges; instead he flung himself into the burning building and started calling for his mother.

‘Mum! Mum, are you alright? Where are you?’

He jumped over bottles and dodged flames as he searched for Distro.

He found her on the floor of the kitchen. She was unconscious, barely breathing as she lay in a puddle of her own blood. There were deep wounds down her side, like she’d been attacked by an angry gryphon, and her face was bruised.

Ka’harja was scared to move her, but he had to get her out of the fire. He picked her up as quickly as he dared and carried her out of the house, moving her over a nearby hill upwind of the fire. Carefully, he put her down in the grass, then he pulled off her shirt and pressed the clean side of it against her wound to stop the bleeding.

*What happened?* Ka’harja’s mind was racing over the possibilities. Had he left the fire going after making porridge? *No, that wouldn’t explain the scratches!* Had

Distro tried to get to a high shelf and fallen? *But then why was there fire?*

He pressed the shirt firmer against Distro's wound and grit his teeth. There was one possibility that made sense, but he didn't want to believe it as Naranako's words from the night before echoed in his mind.

*Har'pies never come this far into Okatako.*

Yes, they do.

A tear rolled down Ka'harja's smoke-coated cheek and he tried to wipe it off, only to leave a smear of his mother's blood under his eye.

*It couldn't have been Har'pies, could it? Ka'harja argued with himself. They've never dared anything like this before! Why would they do this now?*

Ka'harja knew why, but didn't want to think about it. He distracted himself from the thought by focusing on helping his mother.

By the time Distro's eyes flickered open, the smoke was thinning and the crackle of the fire was dying down.

'Ka'harja?' she questioned quietly. At first her rasping didn't sound like words, but she became clearer as she continued. 'Are you alright?'

'I'm fine,' Ka'harja dared to take the pressure off her wound and let out a relieved sigh when he saw it had stopped bleeding. 'Don't get up! You're hurt.'

'Don't tell... me what to do,' Distro groaned, ignoring Ka'harja's protests and lifting herself to her feet. Her wound began to ooze slowly but she pushed Ka'harja away. 'I have to.... Where did they.... Where did they go?'

'Who?' asked Ka'harja.

'The Har'pies!' exclaimed Distro. 'They.... They're looking for Stars. I think. They called her Neg'an.'

Ka'harja nodded. He couldn't seem to speak. He looked at his smoke-coated mother and then turned to the house. He felt his heart wrench sideways. The house that had been his shelter since he'd run away from Heck'ne; the house that had withstood floods as high as the roof, survived storms that picked up trees and blew them past the horizon... and even kept standing after falling stars shook the planet.... It was gone. Reduced to ash and a few half-walls.

No, Ka'harja closed his eyes. He hoped that it was a dream. He'd close his eyes and wake up and he'd have fallen asleep at the table while talking to Stars and this nightmare was just because he'd eaten too much at breakfast.

Deep inside he knew it was hopeless, but he tried anyway.

'It'll be alright,' Distro put her hand on Ka'harja's shoulder. 'It was just stuff. Nobody got hurt.'

'You did,' Ka'harja whispered.

'Scratches heal,' Distro sighed and leant against her son. 'As long as you're safe, I'll be fine.'

Ka'harja sniffed sadly and put an arm around his mother. They watched for a long time as smoke rose from the ruins of their house. Even when the fire had burnt itself out, the air surrounding the house was distorted by the remaining heat.

'They must have done something awful to piss the Har'pies off *this* much,' said Distro. 'I've never known Har'pies to care enough about runaways to follow them past the border.'

Ka'harja sighed. 'They may or may not have beaten their leader. With a rock. A big one.'

Shocked, Distro stared at her son. Then she gave an exhausted half-laugh. 'Explains why they had two troops with them.'

'They had *two* troops?' Ka'harja swallowed anxiously. 'Are you sure?'

Distro nodded. 'A foxen and nurlak troop, and a jutt-jaw family.'

Ka'harja put a hand over his mouth. 'We have to do something....'

'We can't do anything. There were at least fifty of them.'

'Exactly! The caravan isn't that big!' Ka'harja gripped his mother by the shoulders. He almost shook her in frustration but managed to control himself. 'They're going to need all the help they can get fighting them off!'

'We'll never catch them in time,' said Distro as she hung her head.

'No! We can get to them in less than ten minutes if we hurry!' Ka'harja pointed away from the setting sun. 'I didn't track that caravan's route for five years to *not* know how to catch up to them! If we head straight and cut across the river we'll catch them!'

Distro looked to Ka'harja. Her gaze followed his finger to the horizon and she sighed. 'Okay.... Let's get going, then.'

Ka'harja pushed his anxiety to the back of his mind and helped his mother limp across the blackened field.

They had to get to the caravan before the Har'pies did.

They had to help them!

# Chapter 10

## Just Outside the Nigelle Farm; Okatako Glif 6<sup>th</sup>, Year 10,053 AE

Ka'harja and Distro hurried towards the caravan. Their pace was slow, as both were exhausted and sore, but Ka'harja thought they'd made good time. He could see people in the distance gathered in front of the caravan. There were a lot of people; almost five times more than had been at the caravan before.... *Two troops.*

Ka'harja swallowed as he and his mother crept closer. They used the uneven ground to their advantage and slipped from ditch to ditch, careful not to be seen as they got close enough to hear the argument.

'We only want the runaways!' hissed a foxen woman. She lashed her golden tail angrily and stepped towards Sken and Dena, who stood bravely before the Har'pies. 'Give them to us, and we'll leave peacefully.'

'Peacefully?' Sken scoffed. 'What, before or after you *murder* them?'

The foxen hissed like a cat and Ka'harja thought if he could see her face she would have been baring her teeth. 'What do you care about a couple of nurlak breeders? They're worthless scabs! That one—' she motioned to Dena. 'She's too old to bear children! All she does is waste food! And that one—' she pointed to Stars, who cowered at the back of the caravaners, hugged defensively by Annanyn. 'Is as dumb as dirt and twice as useless! Bearing children is all she'll ever be good for!'

'Unlike you, we tend to define someone's worth by who they are and what kind of person they *choose* to be,' Sken's own hiss was twice as loud as the Har'py's, and spittle sprayed from her gills as she screeched unhappily. 'Not by what we can get out of them!'

A second Har'py stepped forward; a nurlak. Ka'harja saw Dena stumble back in fear and realised that this must have been Lah'kort.

'They're not your kind!' he growled. 'Tarr farfah tirr!'

'Anyone with a smile and a wanderlust is our kind!' Sken spat back. 'And we will protect them; no matter what!'

Lah'kort scowled, as if Sken's words had been offensive, while the caravan sent up a cheer of agreement.

'They are *mine*!' Lah'kort screeched, stepping past the first Har'py and coming

nose-to-nose with Sken, who didn't even flinch. 'They are *my* blood! *My* property! My kekik and our zelkin; and my new berr!'

Dena inhaled deeply, setting her trembling jaw, and growled at Lah'kort, 'You think so, but the child is farfeh yalfit! A dassen yalfit! It denies you!'

Lah'kort lifted a hand to his mother, threatening to strike her. 'Neg'an would never betray me and do what I have forbidden!'

'I have!' Stars cried over the crowd. Annanyn hugged her tighter, flaring her gills at the Har'py as Stars continued. 'I love Fabecut! And I love our berr! Tarr is not yours! Farfah berr is made from *kosson*!'

Face twisted with rage, Lah'kort forgot his mother and lunged in Stars' direction; he threw Sken aside and charged at the caravan guards, who cut him off. He looked about them furiously, then stepped back before he took a deep breath and grinned. 'That's alright, Neg'an. I forgive you. Come back now, and I'll let the demon live.... If it's a zelkin. I could do with another daughter.'

Ka'harja felt his stomach churn and he gagged. He couldn't believe what he'd just heard; he'd only half-believed Stars when she'd talked about Lah'kort but... seeing him in person....

'I'll punch your dicks in so hard you'll become your own daughter!' Sken grabbed Lah'kort from behind and threw him back towards his troop. 'Then you can go fuck *yourself*!'

'YOU FISH-FACED KAKA'LI!' Lah'kort scrambled to his feet and lunged at Sken. His hand almost met Sken's cheek. But at the last moment Dena slammed into him and he stumbled back. He struggled against his mother as she grappled at his face with all of her arms, desperate to get a hold on anything she could.

His hair, his ears, his skin; she dug her nails deep into every part she could reach and cut short his angry cry by sinking her teeth into his throat.

Blood gurgled out of his mouth and into his lungs as he tried to scream. He pushed against Dena, desperately trying to get her off as she wrapped her legs tight around his lower shoulders and dragged her sharp nails down his cheeks.

She brought him closer, and then.... She unhooked her legs and kicked away from him with a horrible spray of blood.

A rush of air escaped Lah'kort and he hit the ground with a thud; his throat half-hanging from his neck, oozing onto the damp grass as he convulsed and grabbed at nothing.

Everyone watched in silence as he gave one last horrible choking gasp and fell still.

And then Dena turned her predatory stare to the foxen woman, who stumbled back three steps and shouted with fear and surprise.

'How did— How did you learn to— You're kizza kiita!'

'I was only three when my yalfit stole me and my kekik and brought us to Heck'ne,' Dena spat her son's blood on the ground and rose to her feet. She held the Har'py's gaze while she did, and Ka'harja was glad her dislike of him was as small as it was; he was sure if she gave *him* that look he'd drop dead just from the force of it. 'It's been fifty-two eclipses... do you think I've survived this long by being *weak*?'

Both Har'py troops stepped forward, preparing for a fight, and Ka'harja felt

panic rise in his chest; there were so many Har'pies! The caravan was outnumbered five-to-one. He couldn't bear the thought of watching them die and without thinking he rushed out from his hiding place.

'Hey! Har'pies! Or should I say, uh.... *Oh I didn't think this through!*'

The woman who had been heckling Dena turned abruptly, shouting in surprise, and stopped when she saw Ka'harja. They stared at each other for a brief moment; a dawning recognition falling over them both as they stared.

Ka'harja realised that it was Kay'oten at the same time she realised who he was. She rushed forward, so angry Ka'harja thought she might burst into flames as she came at him.

He didn't even realise he was screaming until Distro slammed into Kay'oten and sent her tumbling across the ground.

'Touch my son,' Distro growled in a tone that made Ka'harja shiver from his ears to his tail. 'And I will rip your face off and shove it so far down your throat that you'll have to give birth to get it out again!'

Kay'oten didn't move from her spot on the ground as Distro continued to threaten her. She stared at the woman's oozing wound with wide eyes, as if she couldn't believe Distro was still standing with such an injury.

Almost half a minute passed after Distro stopped shouting before Kay'oten was able to compose herself. She scrambled to her feet and faced the woman with a sour face. 'He's not *your* son! I don't remember you being there when he was born! I'm pretty sure it was just me and Pert'ana there when I shat the little hal'kaka out!'

'So *you're* Kay'oten?' realisation washed over Distro's face. She stared for a moment before letting out an unearthly shriek of rage and lunging forward. She punched Kay'oten in the nose and spat on her as she hit the ground. '*You're* the bitch who hurt my boy!'

'Don't you *dare* hit me!' Kay'oten staggered to her feet, ignoring the trail of blood that rolled down her lip. 'Do you have *any* idea who I am? I'm Kay'oten! Strongest warrior of—'

'You're a stupid bitch with an ugly face, that's what you are!' Distro interrupted. 'I'm going to rip out your fucking teeth and stab you in the eyes with them!'

'What kind of threat is that?' exclaimed Kay'oten. 'What is *wrong* with you?'

'Mum, stop!' Ka'harja grabbed his mother's arm and tried to pull her away from Kay'oten, but she tugged out of his grip and stepped closer to the Har'py.

'You think you have more right to my son than I do?' Distro growled. 'I know how you Har'pies do things! I challenge you to Gra'gahoo da!'

'A fight to the death? Alright; that's fine with me. Winner gets the runaways,' Kay'oten wiped her bloody lip, and her eyes darted from Distro to Ka'harja. '*All* of them.'

# Chapter 11

## Standing in a Huddle; Just Outside The Nigelle Farm

Glif 6<sup>th</sup>, Year 10,053 AE

The sky was deep red and black from the early sunset struggling to shine through the thick layers of smoke in the sky.

Ka'harja anxiously fussed over Distro as she prepared to fight Kay'oten. He didn't want her to do it. A fight to the death! What if she lost? Kay'oten had fought in hundreds of these battles and won; Distro had never killed anyone before.... At least, not that Ka'harja knew about.

The rules of Gra'gahoo da were simple: no clothes, no weapons, no help. The fight must rely completely on the strength and skill of the two sides, with no outside forces interfering.

'Please, Mum, don't do this!' Ka'harja begged his mother as she tugged off her skirt. The long, deep scratches in her side had leaked blood that soaked the fabric and made it stick to her skin; it peeled off with a disgusting trail of brownish-red following it. 'We can fight them together! You don't need to do this!'

'He's right,' said Sken. 'The Har'pies outnumber us, but we have weapons. And Scara's blessing.'

'The Goddess is a myth! I'd rather rely on my own strength; I know *that's* real,' snorted Distro. 'If I die, you can do as you want... but you're already doing enough favours for those two and I don't want anyone else risking their lives! This way it might be resolved with only one death. *Her* death.'

'You're brave,' Sken bowed her head and flicked her tail. 'It's admirable.... I just hope you know what you're doing.'

'Of course I do!' Distro snapped. 'I've been waiting to rip this bitch apart for *years!*'

Sken stared at Distro, confused.

'I expected her to come sooner,' Distro explained. 'After Ka'harja told me what she'd done to him, I knew *I'd* be the one to kill her, one way or another. I've been wanting to break this bitch's neck since she broke his leg!'

Sken glanced to the scar on Ka'harja's leg, then looked back to Distro with awe.

‘You really care about him, don’t you? Even though he’s not really—’

‘That sentence better finish with “very bright,”’ Distro hissed. ‘Because if anyone else *dares* to imply he’s not my son, I’ll kill them, too!’

Sken’s gills pressed down in shock and she gave a curt nod.

‘Mum, I’m scared,’ Ka’harja gripped Distro’s arm. ‘Please, don’t do this! There has to be another way! What if you win but they still try and take us away?’

‘They won’t. It’s Heck’ne tradition. And they have actual harpies with them; they wouldn’t *dare* defy it,’ Distro put an arm around her son and gave him a comforting squeeze. ‘If I win they’ll leave. Har’pies never break the Gra’gahoo da oath.’

‘And if you lose they’ll take me and the girls away,’ Ka’harja swallowed. He was on the edge of another panic attack again, and it was hard to stay calm.

‘No, they won’t,’ said Distro. She glared out of the corner of her eye at the Har’pies, who stood in a half-circle around Kay’oten. ‘If I lose, Sken’s lot will fight them. Har’pies may honour Gra’gahoo da, but that doesn’t mean *we* have to!’

With that, Distro let go of her son and walked over to Kay’oten. The caravaners slowly surrounded her, completing the circle.

‘Are you ready to die?’ Kay’oten hissed through her grin.

Distro shrugged casually. ‘Eh.’

Insulted by Distro’s dismissal, Kay’oten gave an angry, bird-like screech.

‘Oh, we’re doing bird noises? Alright. Caw caw,’ Distro replied flatly, sticking her hands in her underarms and flapping them like wings. ‘Tweet tweet.... *Chuck.*’

The jutt-jaws screamed at the insult, flashing their wings and lifting their tails— But they made no move forward.

Ka’harja flinched as his mother blew a raspberry. That hadn’t been an insult to Kay’oten, personally— It had been an insult to the *entire Heck’ne!* What was his mother *thinking?!*

Was she trying to psych them out somehow?! Why would she *do* that?!

Kay’oten’s muscles twitched eagerly as she tensed. She wiggled like a cat as she crouched down and prepared herself to spring at Distro. Her tail was puffed out and her ears were pressed back.

Distro just stood in place, staring. Her face was blank and her expression unreadable as she watched Kay’oten, who stopped and waited for Distro to move first.

When Distro didn’t move, not even to brace herself, Kay’oten licked her teeth; seemingly unsettled. ‘Aren’t you scared?’

‘No,’ said Distro, simply. ‘What about you?’

‘Not at all!’ Kay’oten hissed.

‘Could have fooled me,’ Distro grinned now, calmly stepping towards Kay’oten so she was within an arm’s length. ‘Come on then! If you’re not scared, what are you waiting for? Come and get me!’

Kay’oten hesitated. Only for a second, but it was enough; Distro saw her chance and kicked Kay’oten in the groin.

Kay’oten hadn’t even fully fallen to the ground before Distro began to beat her.

‘*YOU BITCH!*’ Distro screeched, her voice ringing out over the shocked silence.

‘HOW DARE YOU?! YOU THINK YOU CAN JUST COME ONTO MY LAND, AFTER ALL THESE YEARS, AND TRY TO TAKE MY SON AWAY FROM ME?!’

Ka’harja watched in shocked silence as his adoptive mother began to kick the shit out of his biological mother. It was merciless. He wondered if the fight would end like this; with the renown warrior Kay’oten screaming on the ground as she got kicked to death by a naked drunk.

‘I’LL KILL YOU!’ Distro leapt at Kay’oten, her hands thrusting forward to wrap around the woman’s neck, but slammed into the ground as Kay’oten finally managed to roll away.

Kay’oten struggled to her feet, coughing. She was winded and her nose was bleeding again, and one of her eyes was already starting to swell. She hissed as she turned to Distro. ‘Of all the cheap, dirty, utterly *honourless* acts you could have—’ her angry screech became a panicked scream as Ka’harja’s mother charged at her.

‘COME BACK AND FIGHT ME YOU COWARD!’ Distro shrieked as she chased Kay’oten around the circle. ‘I’LL RIP YOU APART! GET BACK HERE!’

Kay’oten was running like she was trying to escape a stampede of dragons, and the circle watching them scattered as Distro jumped on her back and tried to strangle her from behind.

‘GET OFF ME, YOU HONOURLESS TISI’MAAR!’ screamed Kay’oten. She began to flail about wildly, desperately trying to shake Distro off. ‘If *anyone* dies today it’s going to be *you!* You cheat! You cheap shot! You mup maka kiita!’

As threatening as the words were, the tone was laughable. Ka’harja felt a strange, morbid pleasure when he heard Kay’oten’s voice break and he was transported in his mind to the times she and his father had laughed at the weakness in his own words.

Then he jumped in shock as Distro landed with a *thump* on the ground and Kay’oten turned and lunged at her.

Kay’oten aimed a low kick at Distro’s face, but Distro leapt into the air with amazing speed and circled behind her adversary. Kay’oten kicked again as she spun, higher this time, but missed as Distro ducked. Kay’oten screamed and stumbled back, hissing angrily.

‘MUP BALAK HAL’KAKA!’ Kay’oten shouted. ‘What is it with you and *hitting me in the vagina?!*’

Distro grit her teeth shook her out her hand, reeling from the punch she’d thrown. ‘Come on *baby*, it’s not like anyone else has been touching it lately. I know *all* about Pert’ana!’

It was the wrong thing to say. With a burst of rage Kay’oten lashed out and kicked Distro in the side. Distro gave a shout as her wound reopened and blood gushed out. She managed to block Kay’oten’s next kick but the woman had gone as savage as a rabid dog. She sunk her teeth into Distro’s hand and the two collapsed in a heap.

Distro managed to put her knees up before she hit the ground and Kay’oten landed on her heavily. Kay’oten gasped and Distro was able to wrench her hand free, but the Har’py was still on top of her and pinned her arms down easily. Distro tried to kick her off, but Kay’oten leant her weight forward and Distro found her knees

pressed tightly between their stomachs.

‘He’s *mine*,’ hissed Kay’oten. ‘I squeezed the tisi’maar out! I own him!’

‘MUM!’ Ka’harja shrieked. Sken had to hold him back as he desperately tried to get to his mother.

Distro’s gaze snapped to her son. His face was tortured with fear. Tears streamed down his cheeks as he struggled against the caravaners.

‘Mum!’ he screamed. ‘Please! I need you!’

‘Aw, what a pity,’ Kay’oten breathed into Distro’s ear, too quiet for the spectators to hear. ‘Let me share a secret with you, woman to woman... *kekik to kekik*: I’m not going to kill him when I take him back. Oh, no... I need to replace Pert’ana. And besides; *it wouldn’t be the first time I’ve had my way with him—*’

*I’LL KILL YOU!* Distro’s dry-throated screech exploded out of her throat like an animal screaming for its life and Kay’oten jumped back in shock. She stumbled and fell in the dirt, hands over her ears, as Distro screamed at her with such an unnatural volume and pitch that it shook the ground and rippled through the tall grass like a gust of wind.

Then Distro rushed forward and, out of nowhere, a dragon took her place on the battlefield. It was as if the creature had burst out of Distro’s skin to defend her.

It gripped Kay’oten by the face and bit down, crushing her skull as its long serpentine body twisted and contorted in its frenzied mauling of the foxen woman. Blood splatted over the spectators as the dragon shook Kay’oten’s corpse by her neck until the flesh severed and her now-headless torso was flung across the field.

The Har’pies screeched in panic as the black-and-green beast gave an unruly roar and hissed in a voice all too familiar, ‘You *bitch!*’

‘M-Mum?’ Ka’harja whispered as he realised who the dragon was. He swallowed his fear and shouted to the creature. ‘MUM! STOP! YOU’VE WON!’

The dragon turned to him and, as suddenly as it had appeared, Distro took its place on the blood-soaked ground. She looked... *different*.

But there was no time for Ka’harja to take in the changes as he rushed forward and caught his collapsing mother.

‘What... happened?’ Distro asked weakly.

Ka’harja’s mouth was dry, but he smiled proudly and squeezed her hand. ‘You called Klict.’

# Chapter 12

## The Caravan's Campsite; Inside The Nigelle Farm Border

Glif 6<sup>th</sup>, Year 10,053 AE

The sky looked like it had been painted with glitter. The smoke had cleared hours ago and the moons were smaller than they had been the night before; the only glow that had grown was the tiny pink moon above the far horizon. The stars had taken advantage of the lack of other lights and were sparkling so brightly it looked like they were dancing on the dark, iridescent blue behind them.

The only thing brighter than the stars were the hot flames that Coborn tended before she scooped a ladle of soup into a pair of ceramic bowls. The bowls were thick, marked with chunky wovlen cursive and cultural paintings, and Ka'harja felt their warmth seep into his hands as he took them from the young cook.

'Nice night,' he commented.

Coborn nodded nervously and mumbled something —too quiet for Ka'harja to hear— before turning back to the fire.

Clicking his tongue anxiously, Ka'harja looked across the caravan. Stars was sitting on her own away from the caravaners who sat around the fire. She kissed her baby's forehead and sighed as she glanced at her mother; who sat on the other side of the fire even further from the crowd. Ka'harja thought of going to comfort Stars while Dena wasn't able to, but he couldn't. He had no idea what to say.

*Sorry that you had to watch your father-brother get his throat ripped out,* Ka'harja thought sarcastically. *If it makes you feel any better, one of my mothers got her head bitten off.*

He shook his head. It was too awkward— *He* was too awkward. He'd just make things worse. And besides... he had to find Distro and make sure she was okay.

Ka'harja's eyes scanned over the caravan but he couldn't see her, so he stopped Trat as he passed and asked.

'Uh, man, I don't know,' Trat shrugged, twitching his ears in a sympathetic gesture. 'I think I saw her walk off somewhere that way.'

'Thanks,' Ka'harja's response was flat; though he hadn't meant it to be. He'd barely heard the answer over his own worried thoughts and it took him a moment to

process which direction Trat had pointed. He weaved through the camp and into the dark shadows cast by the caravans. He could scarcely make out the way down to the river; if it hadn't been for the moonlight shimmering on the water he would have missed the Distro-shaped silhouette that sat at its shore.

With a deep breath, Ka'harja forced a smile onto his face and made his way to her.

Distro flinched as he sat beside her. She turned her face away and shifted awkwardly, scratching at the scales that had grown over her freckles with an anxious energy. Ka'harja elbowed her hand away from her neck before holding out one of the bowls of soup, which he had figured he was lucky not to have spilt on his way down the hill.

Distro sighed as she took it, staring at it rather than eating it, and Ka'harja had to lean over and kiss her before she realised it was food.

She smiled at him with her uneven jaw and her new teeth clanked together as she tried to pull back her underbite into a more comfortable position. Her uncomfortable smile faded into a frown and she flicked her too-long ears in frustration.

Ka'harja was intrigued by the fluff that now spilt out of his mother's ears and fell under its own weight like decorative hair extensions. But when he reached out his hand he found that, instead of following his first instinct to playfully tug on his mother's hair, his palm met her cheek and his thumb wiped away a lone tear that had made its way under her eye.

Her skin barely felt like her own, but he didn't care. No matter what she looked like she was still his mother and nothing —not even turning into a dragon— could ever change that.

Ka'harja slid his hand over his mother's face and rested a finger on her nose. He grinned and pushed against one of her nostrils. 'I bet I could fit an entire finger in one of these bad boys.'

Distro snorted a laugh and batted his hand away from her snout.

'Guess what?' asked Ka'harja as he poked his mother's nose again. He continued when she met his eye with a tired grin. 'You're great.'

Distro's laugh was louder this time. 'No, *you* are!'

'You're greater though,' barely noticing the new deepness to her voice, Ka'harja poked her again. He stopped and looked down at his food as he turned the day over in his mind. 'You saved my life.'

'You're my little boy,' Distro rasped. 'What else was I meant to do? Have that bitch take you back to Heck'ne? I'd never let that happen to you.'

Ka'harja smiled and drank his soup. It was hard to figure out what he was feeling; the last two days had been pretty hectic. He knew, though, that he was relieved Distro was still alive. He couldn't even imagine what it would be like to lose her. Whenever he tried to think about what he would have done if she'd lost the fight or died in the fire, his mind shut off and all he could imagine was a bird flying into a window. Maybe he was supposed to be the bird? He wasn't sure what his brain was doing.

'I love you, Mum,' he finally managed. 'I love you more than I've ever loved

anything else.'

'Even more than that sexy werewolf calendar you got on our holiday to Bonark?'

Ka'harja nearly choked. 'At least twice as much. You didn't see me pulling *that* out of the fire, did you?'

Distro's smile seemed to stick on her now, and even when she looked away it didn't falter. 'How's the soup taste?'

'As salty as Koko's attitude,' Ka'harja laughed. 'I think you'll like it. Give it a go.'

Distro lifted her bowl and blew over the soup; mist flowed into the air and it almost looked like she'd exhaled white smoke.

Ka'harja grinned at his mother as she turned back to him.

'No spoon?' she joked.

Ka'harja shrugged. 'Since when were you the sort of loser to eat soup with a spoon?'

Distro laughed. She put the bowl to her mouth and tried to drink, but the ceramics clinked against her teeth and hot soup spilt down her front.

Ka'harja's shirt ripped in his hurry to get it off. He forced it over his head and wiped the steaming soup off his mother before urging her towards the cold river.

'It doesn't hurt at all,' said Distro as she pulled away from her son. 'It feels... comfortably warm.'

'But it was steaming!' Ka'harja exclaimed. 'You'd have to be a dragon for it to not... burn.... Right. I get it. Stop laughing.'

Still giggling, though covering her mouth to muffle it, Distro shook her head at her son and gave him a shove. 'Did you not notice?' she asked with a grin.

'Look, it's been a *long* day,' Ka'harja plopped down next to his mother and sighed. He watched as Distro started to scratch at her new scales again. 'Itchy?'

'No,' mumbled Distro. 'Just different.'

'You'll get used to it,' Ka'harja grinned. 'Soon, you'll forget what it was like to *not* have scales!'

'Yeah,' Distro chuckled. Then she frowned and shifted uncomfortably. 'Can you look at my back for me? I think something's wrong with it.'

'I'll give you a massage if you like,' Ka'harja told her. 'But you're going to have to take your binder off.'

'I'm pretty sure they've disappeared anyway,' Distro sighed as she turned around. She pulled off her shirt and binder and then groaned. 'Yep, flatter than ever.'

'Isn't that what you wanted?' Ka'harja asked, feeling awkward. 'You always complained about them. Shouldn't losing them be a good thing?'

Distro shrugged. 'I guess.... But I didn't want them completely gone. Just smaller.'

'Damn— DAMN!'

'What?!' Distro jumped at Ka'harja's exclamation. 'What is it?!'

'You nearly got wings!' Ka'harja told her.

Distro frowned. 'What do you mean I "*nearly*" got wings?'

Ka'harja grabbed one of the lumps that were protruding from her back and squeezed it. 'It looks like you had wings, and then they melted half into your back—'

Great Star, it moved! Do that again!

Distro pulled away from her son and shook her head. 'Lose them on the front....'

Slowly, Ka'harja reached up again. He put his hand between Distro's shoulders and laughed when she tensed instinctively and her half-wings squeezed his hand tight.

'You could hold things with these! That's ridiculous,' he laughed. 'Can I have my hand back now?'

'I don't know how to let go,' said Distro. 'Maybe....' She took a deep breath and relaxed, and Ka'harja was able to pull his hand away. 'Are you alright?'

'Never better,' Ka'harja grinned. 'Keep eating and I'll give you that massage.'

Distro nodded and picked up her food. It was obviously difficult for her, but she managed to get most of the remaining soup into her mouth as Ka'harja rubbed her shoulders. What didn't get in her mouth ran down her chin and chest, steaming in the cold night air.

Without thinking Ka'harja passed her his already-damp shirt to wipe herself down. As she did, he gave her a playful nudge. 'So that healer guy's pretty cute.'

'Which guy?' Distro questioned.

'The one with the ponytail and pale skin,' laughed Ka'harja. 'Though he's nowhere near as pale as you. He was hanging around at the back of the group looking nervous?'

'Oh, I saw him,' Distro nodded. 'He was... interesting-looking.'

'I think he was cute!'

Distro shook her head. 'You'd think half a lemon was cute if it looked at you the right way.'

Ka'harja shoved his mother, and she shoved him back. He pushed her again just as a dim glow caught his eye and he turned and saw Sken coming down the hill towards them. He lifted a hand in greeting, and frowned at Distro when she playfully high-fived him.

Sken smiled warmly as she sat next to Ka'harja and her gills gave a small flare. 'So, you two, I have a ques—'

'BAKU!' a voice interrupted from the camp; shouting so loud they cut off Sken. 'BAKU DO YOUR TRICK!'

'I HAVE THE BOTTLES! SOMEONE GET THE CHIKCHIK!'

Sken rolled her eyes as Baku shouted back, before grinning again. 'Foxens at their finest.'

'Yeah, we're a bit like that,' Ka'harja chuckled anxiously. He was tempted to get up and hurry back to camp—he didn't want to miss the trick—but he glanced at his mother, who gave him a severe look, and instead he turned to Sken. 'You had a question?'

'Yes, I hope you don't think I'm being rude, but I...' Sken trailed off. She looked away and twitched her gills. 'I um... don't mean to be insensitive or anything....'

'Go on,' said Distro with a nod.

'What *are* you?' Sken asked. 'You're not foxen?'

Ka'harja frowned. 'Uh, yes she is.'

Sken shook her head. 'Well, I've never seen a foxen like you before.'

‘What are you talking about—’

‘I think she means the whole *turning into a dragon* thing, Ka’harja,’ Distro interrupted her son with a sigh.

‘Yeah, that’s it,’ Sken agreed. She pointed back towards the caravan. ‘None of the others have ever done that before, even in our worst fights. I asked them what happened to you but they just kept going on about some “maiden” and started drinking themselves blind.’

‘Maiden?’ Ka’harja echoed. He continued when Sken nodded, ‘Have you never heard of Klicit before? Maiden Klicit? From the story of Gagoo’galornnga?’

Sken’s eyes widened and her fins flicked back. ‘What in the name of the three moons is a *Gagoo’galornnga*?’

Ka’harja scoffed and turned away. ‘I can’t believe this,’ he mumbled.

‘Get over it, Sweetheart,’ laughed Distro. ‘I don’t think many other cultures talk about him.’

‘I know secas don’t talk about him,’ said Sken. ‘That was supposed to be a *name*?’

‘Gagoo’galornnga and Maiden Klicit are from an old story about a nurlak who killed a wolven shape-shifter,’ Distro explained. ‘It’s supposedly about how foxen people started existing.’

‘*Supposedly*?’ Sken glanced between Ka’harja and Distro. ‘You don’t think it’s the truth?’

Distro opened her mouth to respond but no words came out. Her dark eyes looked lost for a moment, before she closed them and shook her head. ‘After today, I’m not sure I’m brave enough to call it a lie.’

‘You’re braver than I am,’ Ka’harja said with a shiver. He didn’t think anyone would be able to deny *that*.

Distro put a hand on her son’s shoulder. ‘Ka’harja, you’re freezing. Go sit by the fire.’

‘Only if you come too,’ said Ka’harja.

‘Alright, fine,’ Distro sighed before she pushed herself to her feet and pet Ka’harja’s back. ‘Let’s go get you warm.’

Ka’harja rose to follow her and they climbed the hill back to the caravan together. Sken followed behind them, her glowing freckles giving just enough light for the trio to make their way safely uphill. As they reached the top the caravan went silent. Distro took a step back and Ka’harja felt her take his hand.

He wanted to comfort her, but before he had the chance there was an explosion of excited shouting from the caravaners.

‘Come sit with us!’ Baku exclaimed, running up and grabbing Distro’s free hand. He pulled her to the fire and sat her down as the rest of the travellers crowded her.

Ka’harja trailed behind Distro, dragged along by his mother’s firm grip. He wasn’t sure if she was going to let go... or if he’d ever get the feeling back in his fingers if she did.

As she sat down the guards gave a cheer; they raised their bottles and shouted with joy and stumbled around like idiots.

Distro gave a sheepish bow and looked away. ‘You don’t have to do that.’

'But we *want* to!' Baku laughed, his cheeks growing even darker than his drunken flush had already made them. 'You deserve it!'

'It would be an honour if you'd eat with us,' Coborn swallowed as she held out another bowl of soup for Distro; unaware that she'd already eaten. 'N-Not because you've called Klict. That's amazing too but— But the way you fought today.... You're so brave. It's an honour to meet someone you.'

'Thank you,' said Distro. She accepted the food and Ka'harja screamed internally as he remembered he'd forgotten their empty bowls by the river. 'I don't feel brave, though. I was just protecting my son. I can't imagine doing anything less for him.'

Ka'harja smiled, pushing his thoughts about the bowls to the back of his mind, and kissed his mother on the cheek.

'What's it like?' Koko asked, smiling widely. Her ears pricked up and her tail gave a small wag when Distro turned to her. 'Did it hurt? Could you hear or see better? Do your scales have feeling in them or are they numb? Do you—'

'I'm not sure about anything yet,' Distro put a hand up to silence Koko. 'It will take me a while, I think, before I can answer anything like that. But changing... it didn't hurt at all. It was like a rush of adrenaline as time slowed down for me. Then I was suddenly different. I could fit Kay'oten's whole head in my mouth and... I felt the urge to just bite down and....'

'Shake the shit out of her?' Lif snickered. 'Because that's what you did.'

Distro gave a weak smile and nodded.

'Uh, Distro?' Trat gave a cough, and after a nervous pause he continued, 'I'm not an expert or anything... but aren't you supposed to turn back?'

The excited chatter turned to silence as the caravaners nodded and looked around each other.

Distro shrugged. 'I don't know, I guess not.'

There was an awkward quiet as everyone considered Trat's question.

Ka'harja bit his lip. It was true; the stories about dragon-shifting... the women always turned back into themselves afterwards. What made Distro so different? She was foxen, wasn't she—

'You're part wolgen!' Ka'harja exclaimed, gripping his mother by the shoulders and shaking her. 'That's why you're only half dragon! Because you're only half foxen! The wolgen parts got confused!'

Sken frowned. 'That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard!'

'I don't know about that,' Baku argued. 'I mean, it's not like anyone has any better idea of what's happened to her. I vote it's the wolgen blood in her that's done it.'

Lif raised his hand. 'Seconded!'

'You're all nuts,' Felelor grumbled. 'The Maiden was wolgen; don't you think that her magic would know what to do with wolgen blood?'

'Not to sound, uh... ig-ignorant or an-anything,' piped up a voice. Ka'harja looked and saw the caravan's healer fiddling with his long, blonde hair. 'B-But I-I-I'm not— Entirely sure wh-what's going o-on. Wh-Who's the M-Maiden?'

'Coff, I'm going to kill you, and then I'm going to kill myself,' grumbled Koko as

she tugged on his ponytail. 'I knew you grew up in La'Can, but I didn't realise you'd also lived in a cave.'

'Can we please not do this?' Distro groaned. 'Klict isn't even real.'

The caravaners let out gasps of shock and Ka'harja put an arm around his mother as she buried her face in her hands. He hated seeing her so stressed, but he had no idea what to do to make it better.

'You don't believe in the Maiden?' Baku asked gently.

'*I don't know,*' Distro whispered. 'I don't know *anything* anymore.'

Trat scoffed. 'How can you *not* believe in her after you—' he was cut off as Felelor punched his shoulder so hard he stumbled.

Ka'harja was glad he wasn't on the receiving end of Felelor's fist.

'So, you're half wolvern?' Coborn sat beside Distro and reached to touch her on the shoulder, though she pulled back at the last second and swallowed. 'I thought there was something about your name that sounded familiar. Distro's a wolvern name isn't it? From Bonark?'

'Konde, actually,' Distro grinned. 'But I'm from La'Can. I've changed my name like, thirty-billion times!'

Everyone stared as Distro laughed— Though it sounded more like a sob to Ka'harja.

'What was your birth name?' asked Coborn.

'Koktansi,' Distro blushed.

'Gighi, that's a really bad name for you,' Stars blurted from her place by the caravans. 'It doesn't suit you at all. Na. No wonder you changed it!'

'I also went by Tankiti for a year or two,' Distro admitted. 'Yes, it's a man's name, I know. I was experimenting.'

Koko let out a laugh. 'That's my dad's name!'

Snickers filled the air as the caravaners made jokes, but the mood dropped as Distro began to examine her scale-covered hands.

'Maybe if I wasn't half wolvern I wouldn't be so messed up—'

'Don't say that!' Stars interrupted. 'You're *not* messed up! Don't maka like a liar!'

Ka'harja watched as Stars pushed past the caravaners and stood over Distro; Annanyn followed closely at her side, carrying Little Demon.

'Stars, I don't think she means—'

'You're *not* messed up! You're the bravest kiita in the whole world!' Stars continued, oblivious to everyone's objections. 'And you're smart and kind, as well as kama! Just because you look different doesn't mean you're messed up or na kama; especially not when it was you doing something so taa'han that made you be what you are!'

Dena grabbed her daughter's hands and made to move her away from Distro. She tried to comfort her daughter in Har'py, but obviously failed as Stars pulled away again and frowned.

'She doesn't understand how mip she is, Kekik!' Stars said. 'You're good. You're *really* good, Distro. The mip kiita.'

Distro stared at Stars for a long moment before looking back down to her hands.

‘The best warrior, huh?’

She looked even more tired than before, Ka’harja thought. He put an arm around his mother. He wasn’t sure what to say. But he knew he had to say *something* after Stars. He swallowed, ‘Stars is right. And even if she wasn’t, I’d still love you.’

For a second, Distro smiled. Then she sighed and dropped her hands to her side.

‘You’re good, Kekik Distro,’ said Stars. ‘You’re not messed up and bad and broken. You’re brave and strong and smart.’

Distro raised a hand to silence Stars. ‘You don’t understand. I *am* messed up,’ she said. ‘I’m the halfway point between two types of *not* messed up, and nothing can change that now.’

‘*You* don’t understand,’ Stars frowned. ‘You think you’re messed up because you’re half one thing, half another?’

Distro looked up, shocked at the aggression in Stars’ voice, and nodded.

‘My baby’s not messed up, and he’s tia’fio, too. Half one thing, half another...’ Stars’ tone lost its edge as she glanced to the sky and trailed off, distracted by a shooting star.

The entire caravan stopped to watch the star fall. When it faded away into the distance they all seemed to let out a collective breath of relief; they didn’t say it, but Ka’harja knew they’d been worried the falling star would land like the night before.

Even after the star was gone they still stood in silence, glancing anxiously between themselves.

Stars was the first to speak, ‘Klict was part dragon just like you are now, remember?’

Distro nodded. ‘Well, yes, she was but—’

‘And all foxen people come from parts of Klict, right?’

‘Yes—’

‘So really, you’ve *always* been part dragon,’ Stars said simply. ‘And so you haven’t changed on the inside. Just the outside. And the outside doesn’t matter. If the outside mattered, we’d all look exactly the same, and there’d be no kama or niritaka or tia’fio or harpy or foxen or nurlak. We would all just be bal’hiki.’

The caravaners looked as confused as Ka’harja felt. But Distro seemed to understand what the girl was trying to say as she gave her a nod and took a deep breath, sitting up straight and picking up the bowl Coborn had given her before.

‘We would all just be *bal’hiki*,’ she echoed. Then a smile turned up the corners of her lips, and she looked up at the girl. ‘Well... I’m glad we’re not all the same. You’re right. We’d be boring if we were.’

Everyone watched in silence as she clanked the ceramics against her teeth and spilt soup over herself. After she was done there was an agonising quiet that wasn’t interrupted until Distro burped.

‘*You*, give me your drink,’ she grumbled, pushing herself to her feet.

Baku passed her the almost-full bottle and she gulped it down. Then she threw the bottle in a random direction and then turned around.

‘I’m going for a walk,’ she said. ‘I’ll see you all in a few hours. Ka’harja! Sit your arse back down! You’re *not* coming with me!’

Ka’harja —who was halfway off his seat— plopped back down and sighed. ‘Be

safe.'

Distro didn't acknowledge him as she wandered away.

Ka'harja almost laughed; anyone else would have disappeared into the darkness by now, but her too-pale skin practically glowed in the moonlight and the caravaners watched as she began walking in circles around the field.

The group shifted awkwardly, obviously lost at what to say.

'Okay, no, but really,' Sken broke the tension. 'What's this story about Klict? I'm as lost as an incarrah in a tsunami.'

'Maiden Klict is the ancestor to all foxen people,' Koko explained. 'There's an old song that goes along with it. I can't remember the lyrics but it was good.'

'And who is Gagoo'galenga?'

'Galornga,' Koko corrected. 'He was a nurlak who wanted to be the king of Heck'ne. He thought if he killed a dragon he'd end up higher rank than the Prophet.'

'Mala'kala Har'kark,' Stars chimed in. 'He banished Gagoo'galornga, but Gagoo'galornga came back with dragon scales and took over all of Heck'ne with the magic they gave him!'

'I thought this was a foxen story?' Sken gave an impish grin. 'Why do *you* know so much?'

'Gagoo'galornga is why nurlak can't be troop leaders,' Stars blinked. 'Because Gagoo'galornga was tarnarp and shamed us, and made everything bad for us. Did you know the mup ranking foxen is still mip than the mip ranking nurlak in Heck'ne? Is that the same here? It doesn't seem like it's the same here. Are we equals?' she looked to Ka'harja. 'We're friends, right? That means we're the same rank? You're not more mip than me, and I'm not more mup than you?'

Ka'harja nodded. 'Everyone's the same rank here.'

'Except for me,' Sken laughed, sitting next to Ka'harja and putting her arm around him. 'I'm the boss. You all have to listen to me.... I'm uh, what did you call it? "Mip"?''

Koko gave her a slap around the head, which only made her laugh more.

'Alright, I get it,' Sken threw up her hands. 'I'm not appreciated for my hard work.'

'I appreciate you,' Stars looked hurt. 'Please don't think I don't.'

'I was joking,' said Sken. She flicked the barb on her tail at Koko. 'So Galornga killed a dragon? How did that make foxen people exist?'

Lif and Trat stepped forward and offered their boss the answer:

'The dragon was actually a shape-shifter,' Trat explained. 'Maiden Klict— The lost Canis heir. There's a lot to it, but the story is basically that she was in her wolvern form when Galornga first found her, and he kept her captive until she went crazy and thought he was in love with her.'

Annanyn shook her head. 'The poor thing.'

'Yeah,' Baku agreed. 'She had the chance to run away, too, but she was so far-gone because of Galornga's abuse that she was too scared to leave him. In the end, she was nothing but pieces of shredded corpse in the swamplands.'

'Galornga found out she was a dragon,' Koko explained. 'She shifted for him after a few years of being his prisoner; thinking that if she told Galornga what she

was, he'd marry her and stop abusing her. Instead he killed her halfway through her shifting back, and then ripped her scales off and left the rest of her to rot in the swamp.'

Lif nodded. 'The pieces still had shape-shifting magic in them when she died, and they ended up turning into a bunch of men.'

'M-Men?' Coff's voice came from behind Ka'harja, and Ka'harja nearly shouted with fright. 'Why d-did they turn i-into *m-men*?'

Ka'harja swallowed. 'That's just how the story goes.'

'The foxen men started a war with Heck'ne,' Koko continued. 'And they took back Klict's scales. They ripped them apart and they turned into a bunch of women.'

'And that's why foxen women turn into dragons when they're angry,' Stars finished.

There was a moment of silence before Felelor gave a bark-like laugh.

'That was the worst explanation of the story I've ever heard!' he sniffed and flicked his ears. 'Sit down, shut up, and let Naranako tell it properly.'

# Chapter 13

## **The Nigelle Farm Ruins; Okatako** **Glif 7<sup>th</sup>, Year 10,053 AE**

Ka'harja wasn't sure when he'd fallen asleep. He'd woken up in a sitting position with a blanket thrown around his shoulders and an unopened bottle of White Dragon Wine at his feet. His back was sore from the awkward way he'd slept and he felt his muscles complain every time he bent down to sort through the burnt remains of his house.

He looked at the remaining walls of the building and sighed; it was like losing a part of his family. He didn't want to believe it had happened but everywhere he looked he saw the grim reality that used to be his home. It wasn't long before he felt himself starting to tremble and, trying to keep himself calm, he took a deep breath and tried to think of the positives.

He had friends now, he supposed. People he actually sort of liked. And they were helping him and Distro salvage anything and everything they could.

Ka'harja grumbled and tugged off the cloth from his mouth; he couldn't breathe with it on and his chest was starting to ache. Coff had been worried about the ash and soot getting into everyone's lungs, and being a healer he was probably right. But Ka'harja just couldn't bear to wear it any longer.

The stone bathroom had barely been touched by the flames, though the smoke had stained most of the cloth and towels on the shelves. Ka'harja wondered if they could wash them or if it'd be better to leave them behind.

His question was answered by Distro gathering up an armful of cloth and making her way to the caravan that stood off to the side. He grabbed a handful of things, himself, and followed his mother.

The floor of the caravan was covered in things saved from the house. Slightly warped pots and pans were piled against the back of the caravan, while a few singed-but-okay metal boxes had been pulled out of the ashes.

As he put his armful of fabric down he recognised the enchanted sack. It was completely untouched by the flames, despite the fact it had been in the main room where the worst of the blaze was, and Ka'harja turned to his mother with a questioning look.

‘Fireproof charms were ten percent off,’ she mumbled. ‘And I was already getting the invisibility enchantment put on.’

Ka’harja laughed. He felt guilty about taking the things, but he was happy to know that none of it was damaged. Perhaps he could sneak it back into Coff’s caravan when everyone else was busy.

‘Hey, don’t laugh, I saved twenty gold on that enchantment—’

‘*WHAT?*’ Ka’harja knew that a fireproof charm wasn’t worth *fifty* gold— And that Distro must have paid at least three times that much for a ten percent saving to be *twenty* gold. He quickly tried to calculate it in his head and nearly slapped his mother when he figured it out. ‘You paid *two hundred gold* for a fireproofing enchantment?’

‘No, I paid one hundred and eighty!’ Distro snapped. ‘You’re forgetting that I saved twenty!’

‘Saving twenty gold on a fireproofing charm should mean you get it for *free!*’ he retorted. ‘You could have gotten a cheaper one somewhere else—’

‘And have the enchantment wear off after a week? No thank you!’ Distro snapped back. ‘Lifetime guarantees don’t come from cheap enchanters!’

‘*Lifetime guarantees don’t come from cheap enchanters,*’ Ka’harja mocked. ‘Great Star, Mum, no wonder we’re always broke!’

‘You mean: no wonder we always have things that work properly!’ Distro put her hands on her hips and shook her head. ‘Imagine if I used cheap ingredients for the potions? They’d not be half as good!’

Ka’harja just laughed and walked back to the ashes of his house.

‘Don’t you walk away from me!’ Distro called out, following her son. She nearly ran into Baku as he came out of the pantry. ‘You! Baku, was it? Tell Ka’harja for me— Tell him that it’s better to pay more for something that works, than pay less and have to replace it later!’

Baku looked stunned. ‘I— Ah— Wha— Huh?’

‘She paid two hundred gold for a fireproof enchantment on a canvas sack,’ Ka’harja explained.

‘*How much?*’ Koko’s voice called from behind the burnt wall and she poked her head out of the pantry. ‘Scara in the High-World, who pays that much for an enchantment that’ll wear off in a month’s time?’

‘*Well,* I’ve had the enchantment on it for five years, and it hasn’t worn off!’ Distro huffed. ‘And if I was paying ten gold every month for five years, I would have paid... uh... a *lot* more than two hundred by now!’

Baku shot Koko a look, as if asking her to say something, but Koko just shrugged before retreating back into the room.

‘The stuff in here’s not too bad,’ she called. ‘It’s mostly smoke damage! Everything that’s sealed should be fine!’

‘Let me sort through it all. I know what I’m doing,’ Ka’harja chuckled, though it sounded sadder than he meant it to. It was silly, but he hated the idea of anyone else being in the pantry right now. He wanted to go through the remains of his childhood on his own. Take in each herb and its smell, slowly, while sitting in the corner of the burnt-up room behind the alchemy table where he could pretend he was just relaxing

with a bottle of drink while practising his craft.

He knew he couldn't actually sit and smell each herb, though. Not with the caravaners hanging around. So he settled with checking through the glass jars for which ingredients were salvageable and passing them out to his mother, who took them to the caravan and chucked them in the back with little care.

'That's all the ingredients,' said Ka'harja as he bent under the low door where his mother was anxiously waiting. 'Are you alright, Mum?'

'The table,' she blurted. 'Is it alright?'

Ka'harja nodded dumbly and Distro let out a tense breath.

'Oh, praise the Great Star,' she mumbled. 'That was a gift from my parents.'

'*Everything's* a gift from your parents!' Ka'harja laughed. 'But, no, it's fine. We're going to need a few people to lift it, though.'

Distro glanced around. 'You!' she exclaimed when she saw Felelor. 'Come here!'

Ka'harja put his face in his hand as Felelor stared at his mother and asked, 'Why?'

'Don't talk back to me! Get over here, *now!*' Distro snapped in such a motherly tone Felelor jumped and rushed over without further question.

He was quickly joined by Trat and Naranako, who'd heard Distro's scolding from around the wall and instinctively followed. They looked doubly as confused and almost three times as guilty as Felelor, and Ka'harja almost laughed until his mother ordered him out of the way.

'Goddess in the High-World!' Koko laughed as she rounded the corner. 'Did it just get more foxen around here, or was it just me? I haven't heard a woman snap like that since I told my parents I was moving out!'

Distro laughed, which turned into a cough.

'Baku! Lif!' Koko snapped in the same tone Distro had used. She waited a moment as the poor men skidded around the corner before pointing to Distro. 'Do *exactly* as she says.'

'Yes ma'am,' Lif said obediently, nodding.

When Baku didn't nod, Koko gave him a shove. 'I mean it, Baku!'

'I know,' Baku smiled, motioning at one of the bruises from their fight the other night. 'You rarely don't.'

'We need to move the alchemy table,' Distro said simply. 'I won't leave without it.'

'*Of course,*' Felelor sighed. 'You can't just get a new one?'

'My mother gave that to me!' Distro snapped back.

'Yeah,' Ka'harja said playfully. 'Her mother gave it to her! Just like she gave her the table and chairs, and just like she gave her the curtains— Oh, and just like her father gave her the—'

'*Ka'harja!*' Distro snapped. She tried to continue, but her voice crackled so much her next sentence was inaudible. She put her hands on her hips as her son started laughing.

'Make sure to tell Krarf which caravan you put it in so he can get the stronger cart-pullers to take it,' said Koko as she turned to leave. 'Distro? Can I talk to you for a moment?'

'If she can talk!' Ka'harja called as the two women walked away.

The men waited for a moment before turning to each other and laughing loudly.

'Women are terrifying,' Trat snickered, though there was a hint of anxiety in his tone as he brushed a curl out of his face. Ka'harja couldn't help but admire the man's hair, and as the sun hit it he realised that it wasn't actually black, but a beautiful dark blue. 'I hear them shout and I just have flashbacks to the warden in Honey-Oak.'

'I think it's attractive,' Baku admitted, his uneven grin spreading across his face again. 'What's more foxen than a woman who knows what she wants? You *never* found women like that in Canis! I mean, not without them being an *actual* bitch with no boundaries.'

The boys laughed, though Ka'harja just shuffled back nervously. 'I'll leave you to it?' he mumbled. 'I don't think I'd be much help, I'd just throw you all off-balance.'

'Alright, tall boy,' Felelor clicked his fingers and motioned into the pantry. The rest of the men responded and followed.

Ka'harja was left standing awkwardly in the open, feeling out of place in what used to be his home. He wasn't used to being around so many people, nor was he sure how to interact with any of them. His mother had the luck of being a woman; she could bond over that with Koko... But Ka'harja wasn't interested in the normal banter most foxen men enjoyed. He wasn't interested in girls or wrestling; he liked alchemy and plants and being alone and... and he liked his mother's sense of humour.

'Are— Are you al-alright?' a meek voice asked from beside Ka'harja, and he jumped around to see Coff. 'You l-look like you're, uh....'

Ka'harja sighed as Coff trailed off and scored the ground with his oddly-shaped boot. Ka'harja was trying to figure out what was strange about it when Coff cleared his throat, and his eyes snapped back to Coff's face. 'It's... been a long day.'

'I, uh— I im-imagine it h-has.'

The two shuffled awkwardly, unsure of how to continue.

Ka'harja took a deep breath and motioned for Coff to follow him as he started walking around the ashy remains. 'So, uh... you're a healer? Do you know much about alchemy?'

'Um, a l-little,' Coff wouldn't meet Ka'harja's eye. 'Mostly things l-like cottonflower tea and... other... medicines.'

'Cottonflower tea was the first potion I ever learnt!' Ka'harja grinned, trying to diffuse the tension. 'I still remember when Mum told me I was going to make it. I was disappointed because I thought it wasn't a real potion but... she was right. It's the most important potion I've ever made.'

Coff smiled back, though weakly. 'Cotton— Cottonflower t-tea was the first medicine I-I l-learnt, too. I remember my mentor t-telling me the number one rule for the tea was to never—'

'Charge nurlak for it!' Ka'harja exclaimed, his ears twitching with excitement. 'Yeah, that's what Mum said, too! I remember she taught me a little rhyme to help me with the recipe. *Boil the water, it's a breeze! Then into squares we cut the leafs....*'

He trailed off when he saw his mother standing alone in the middle of what used to be the main room. Even from the kitchen door-frame, he could see the pale white

lines down her cheeks where her tears had washed away the ash.

‘Mum?’ he managed. ‘Are you okay?’

Distro didn’t turn as Ka’harja gently placed a hand on the top of her head, though she closed her eyes and sniffed.

Ka’harja could feel his mother trembling as he looked to where she’d been staring. He nearly cried himself when he saw it: the Eight Star tapestry, completely untouched by the smoke and flames. Shining as brightly as it had the morning before when they’d shared breakfast with Stars and Dena.

‘*We’re not alone,*’ Distro’s rasp was so quiet Ka’harja nearly missed it. ‘*Welten hasn’t forsaken us.*’

He wasn’t sure what to say as Coff stepped beside his mother and put a comforting hand on her shoulder.

The Eight Star deities weren’t real, were they? Gods didn’t exist... *did they?*

Ka’harja shook his head, trying to clear it. He’d never had reason to believe in them before. Nothing had ever hinted that the deities were real, much less watching over them. *But...* he could barely deny it now, could he? His mother had turned into a dragon— She’d called Klict. Could that mean the other gods existed, too? And what about Animon? Aurn? The Okaras— If one god existed, who could say that any of the other religions weren’t true, too?

He realised that this was what his mother was feeling and more, and gave her shoulder a squeeze. She sniffed again and put her face in her hands as Ka’harja glanced about the burnt-down house. He saw the caravaners watching them from a distance; sympathetic looks came from all directions as Distro began to sob.

‘Do you think the gods might actually... exist?’ he finally managed to ask. ‘I don’t know whether I believe it or not, but if you think they can, then maybe...’

‘I never thought—’ she cut off with another sob. ‘I never thought they could, before. I never *wanted* to believe but— But Klict is real. I can feel her with me— She’s with me, Ka’harja! I can feel her and hear her and she’s telling me things that I don’t understand!’ she put her hands over her ears and let out a cry. ‘I don’t understand! I don’t understand what she wants me to do!’

Ka’harja dropped to his knees and pulled his mother into a tight embrace. He rocked her gently, side to side, and whispered to comfort her as she buried her face in his chest.

Coff shuffled nervously before joining them on the ground. ‘Are y-you hearing v-voices?’

Distro shook her head as Coff began to look her over. ‘It’s not a *voice* voice, it’s.... I don’t know what it is.’

‘You’re— You’re in a l-lot of shock,’ Coff said seriously. Ka’harja was surprised that the nervous man he’d spoken to a moment before could take such a serious tone. ‘You need to— To rest. Deep breaths. In... out. In... and out.’

Distro did as he said. Her chest heaved awkwardly at first but after a moment it evened out and she calmed down.

Coff put a hand on her chest when her rasp didn’t clear and frowned. ‘You sound l-like you m-might have an— An infection.’

‘I’ve always sounded like this!’ Distro snapped. Her voice cracked in protest of

her volume and she started coughing. When she stopped her gaze softened and she sighed. 'The cough is new.'

Coff opened his mouth to respond, looking anxious again, but was cut short as Stars approached.

'Gighi! It's not burnt at all!' she exclaimed. 'It doesn't even have smoke on it! It's so beautiful. Do you think it's safe because of the deities that teach magic? Do you think they protected it for you because it was a gift from Ka'harja?'

Ka'harja looked up at Stars, who was looking back and forth between Distro and the tapestry. He squeezed his mother's hand as she took a deep breath.

'Yes. I think they did. I... think they're watching over us.'

Ka'harja didn't mean to sigh. But he was tired and confused. He wasn't sure what he believed anymore. 'We'll have to roll it up and pack it away, that's going to be difficult.'

'I can do it!' Stars exclaimed. 'Not to be a bahi, but Baku showed me how to roll up bedrolls and said I can roll things really mip because I have four arms! It's something I'm mip at! I can do it! Not a bakti at all!'

Ka'harja let himself smile as Stars hurried over to the tapestry and carefully unhooked it from the wall.

'I'll be careful with it!' she promised as she stumbled towards a clean patch of grass away from the house. Everyone watched as she lay the tapestry out and carefully began to roll it up. She took her time, unrolling it again whenever she made a mistake and trying to get it perfect. Her mouth was moving the whole time and Ka'harja wondered if she thought they could still hear her; though when he strained his ears he discovered she was singing to herself, and the song was so silly Ka'harja let out a laugh and had to cover his mouth with a hand.

Distro laughed too, but it turned into another coughing fit that made her grip her healing wound and sob.

'D-Did it reopen?' Coff gasped, pulling her shirt up. Then he sighed with relief. 'Thank the G-Goddess. Distro, uh... you need t-to come to my— My caravan. I need to um, make s-sure you're alright. You shouldn't be— Be around so m-much ash with that w-wound. I d-d-d— Don't want it getting con-conta— Contam— Contaminated.'

For once, Distro didn't argue. She let the boys help her to her feet and leant on Coff as he led her away. She got a few meters away from her son before she turned back.

'Ka'harja?'

'Yeah, Mum?' Ka'harja's voice broke as he responded, and he swallowed to try and hide it. 'What's up?'

'How'd you like to move out of Okatako?' she asked, gently. 'A new start somewhere we've never been before?'

He wasn't sure. A different country... was that a good idea?

'Think about it for me?' asked Distro with a weak smile.

'I will,' Ka'harja promised. He sat dumbly in the dust as his mother left with the healer. He wasn't sure what to do besides stare into the distance. *A different country....*

'You okay?' before Ka'harja could respond, Felelor had offered him his hand. 'Do

you need anything?’

‘I’ll be fine,’ Ka’harja sighed as Felelor helped him stand. He wandered away and continued kicking through the ash, deliberately avoiding eye contact with anyone who approached him.

Several times the caravaners tried to start conversation, but they eventually gave up after too many of Ka’harja’s half-hearted responses. They settled for flicking his leg with their tails whenever they passed. Ka’harja was grateful that they understood, but even with everyone around him showing support, he couldn’t help but feel frustrated... and guilty. It wasn’t fair! All he’d done was try and help Stars and look what had happened! And the caravaners... they were so willing to help him... what if they found out that he’d stolen from them? What would they do then?

He tried not to think about it and kicked up a cloud of ash.

Something hard and a little bit heavy hit his foot and he bent down to find it. He dug a small knife out of the ashes and felt himself start to laugh.

‘*Guess I won’t need that shovel after all,*’ he mumbled. He pulled the blade out of its sheath and held it up to the light. As he did, he saw Trat watching him, confused. ‘I uh... made a joke with my mum the night before last because I’d lost this. I said I’d need a shovel to find it...’

He trailed off, staring at the sun’s reflection on the black glass.

‘You alright?’ Trat asked.

‘Yeah,’ Ka’harja inhaled sharply and sheathed the blade again. ‘I’m fine.’

‘Do you need anything?’

Ka’harja shrugged. There wasn’t much anyone could offer him right now that would make him feel any better.

‘Mm. Fire’s.... It’s rough,’ Trat sighed, motioning to his scars in a way that told Ka’harja he understood how he was feeling more than anyone else ever could.... Then he looked to the wall the tapestry had hung on and put his hands on his hips. ‘So... your tapestry was a little lacking. You only believe in the Original Nine?’

‘Yeah,’ Ka’harja gave a weak grin. ‘Mum thinks that Full Disciples are unnecessarily specific.’

‘Don’t tell Annanyn that!’ Trat laughed (though, Ka’harja heard an anxious shaking in his voice). ‘She’s an aura sensor.’

‘Maybe Annanyn can convince Mum that the other magics exist, while she’s got an open mind!’ he was only half-joking. He shuffled awkwardly in the quiet that followed, not meaning to look away but not able to stop himself.

‘Well. I’ll leave you be. And, look. If you need to talk about... *this*... I’ll be an ear. Alright?’

‘Thanks,’ Ka’harja sighed and turned to continue his search, nearly colliding with Stars as he did. He wasn’t sure how long she’d been standing behind him and almost scolded her for not announcing herself; he didn’t, though, and forced a smile onto his face. ‘How did you go with the tapestry?’

‘Mip well! I’m the *best* at rolling things up!’ Stars bragged, shifting her heavy-looking load of books. ‘Koko said that’s the word for mip that everyone else will understand! Best! I’m the *best*! And when you see how good I did, you’ll agree I’m the mip *and* the best!’

‘Sure,’ Ka’harja shrugged. ‘Hey. Don’t bother with packing up the books, they’re ruined.’

‘Ruined?’ Stars twitched her ears curiously. ‘What do you mean they’re ruined?’

‘You can’t read them.’

‘Of course I can’t!’ Stars scoffed. ‘I can’t read *anything!*’

‘No, I mean they’re smoke-damaged,’ Ka’harja grabbed one of the books off her pile and flicked through it. ‘See? They’re broken. *Nobody* would be able to read these.’

‘Oh, I didn’t realise they were broken,’ Stars sighed, her ears pressing back with her disappointment. ‘I’m sorry I’m not very good at helping. I’m kimpt. I promise I’m kimpt.’

‘I know you’re trying, and you’re doing good,’ Ka’harja put a hand on her shoulder and flicked his tail against her leg. ‘You’ve been a big help.’

He wasn’t sure if that was actually true. He almost felt like it was her fault his house was gone— That if he hadn’t offered to help her none of this would have happened and he’d still be trying to wake his mother for breakfast.... Probably tipping some fel cider on her face or clipping clothes pegs into her hair or seeing how high a stack of gold coins he could make on her forehead.

*But it... isn’t Stars’ fault,* Ka’harja tried to shake the thought. *She wasn’t the one who did this. It was Kay’oten.... Kay’oten is to blame.*

‘I keep doing things wrong,’ said Stars. Her sad sigh brought Ka’harja back from his thoughts. ‘I’m just picking up the wrong things and getting in the way. I’m kizza mup, huh? Kami mip.’

‘I don’t think you’re the worst,’ Ka’harja said with a shrug. He wanted to help lift her spirits, but he just wasn’t sure if he could. Not with the way he was feeling. He just wanted to be left alone to be miserable without having to worry about anyone besides himself. But... He couldn’t just leave her. She was suffering, too. ‘And you’re not in *my* way,’ he lied. ‘Why don’t you stay with me? I know what’s useful, and you have four arms to carry everything with!’

Stars’ face broke into a wide smile. ‘I could carry twice as much as you! That *would* be useful!’

Ka’harja flicked an ear and motioned for Stars to follow him. They picked through the ash for a while, collecting the few remains they could find. At first Stars’ constant chatter annoyed Ka’harja; but after a while he realised it was the only thing keeping him distracted from how sad he was and he started to encourage her.

‘There were a lot of these in your house before the fire,’ Stars picked up a filthy glass bottle. ‘Baku said they’re too dangerous to keep because the heat breaks them... but this one looks okay.’

‘The heat makes them crack on the inside, and they can shatter when you try and clean them, even if they look alright at first. It’s not worth the effort.’

Stars didn’t seem fazed and dropped the bottle to the ground. As she did, something behind Ka’harja caught her eye and she waved. ‘Koko!’

Ka’harja turned just in time to have something thrust into his arms.

‘I think this is yours?’

It was a book— No, a calendar— No... *the* calendar. The werewolf calendar he’d

gotten in Bonark. Ka'harja felt faint; had Koko looked through it? She probably did, to know it was his.

'Oh, stop panicking. I've got six brothers, I've seen my share of porn stashes,' Koko rolled her eyes.

Ka'harja let out an anxious laugh as he looked through the half-burnt drawings of muscular werewolf men. 'Thank the Eight it was the bottom half that got burnt, hey?'

Stars peered over his shoulder. 'What was on the bottom half?'

Ka'harja fumbled, unsure how to respond, but Koko nudged Stars and grinned.

'What's on the bottom half of men, Stars?' she asked with a snicker.

'Oh,' Stars carefully took the calendar from Ka'harja and began to flick through the pages. 'I would have thought you'd have liked the bottom half to have to have not been broken. I know I would have liked to see it.'

Ka'harja pushed the thought to the back of his mind as Stars continued looking through the months. She paused on the last page.

'This one isn't damaged at all!' she held the calendar up for Ka'harja, then turned it back and looked closely. 'Gighi. He's really big. Kosson! He would be mip kata, don't you think?'

Ka'harja laughed nervously and eyed Koko, who was snickering into her hand. 'You, uh... You can keep it if you like.'

'Gighi! Thanks!' Stars exclaimed, her face lighting up with excitement. 'I've never owned anything like this before! It's mip! I'm going to put it with everything else of mine! I have more things now, did I tell you? All farfah! Baku gave me a book and is going to teach me how to read!'

Koko playfully punched Ka'harja in the hip as Stars hurried away.

'What a fantastic gift, hey?'

'Shut up!' Ka'harja felt his cheeks burn with embarrassment. He sighed when Koko laughed. 'She might as well have it, I guess. It would have only been left behind if she didn't want it. I don't know why she's interested, though.'

'It's not like she hasn't had sex before!' Koko put her hands on her hips. 'She has a *baby*. She's probably going to enjoy that calendar a lot, you know!'

'I'm going to ignore you, now,' said Ka'harja as he turned away. 'Nothing personal, I just don't want to hear you speak ever again.'

Koko just laughed and walked away.

A few moments of fantastic silence passed, then Stars grabbed Ka'harja from behind and pulled him into a hug.

'I have to tell you about Fabecut!' she exclaimed.

'Who?'

'Little Demon's yalfit!' she grinned. 'He's not as muscular as the man in that picture, but he was still really strong and kama! He could lift me right off the ground while we were kata! It was amazing! I'd never had kata standing up before I met him — Well, I'd had kata leaning against rocks and things, but that doesn't really count as standing up, does it? Fabecut was really gentle, too! It was nice. Oh, once he—'

'Hey, hey now!' Ka'harja forced himself to laugh; it was very fake, but Stars didn't seem to notice as he cut her off. 'You're making me jealous here. Let's talk

about something else.'

Stars went quiet for a moment, her ears twitching and her brow furrowed as she tried to think of something to talk about.

Relieved, Ka'harja let out a breath. The *last* thing he wanted to talk about was her sex life.... Maybe they could go back to talking about—

'He was staying around here, you know!' Stars blurted. 'We saw each other for...' she counted on her hands, before holding up eighteen fingers. 'Purn-ulnan days! Did you ever see him?'

Ka'harja thought back, but he couldn't remember meeting any dassens in the past year. Or two. Or three! He wasn't even sure he'd ever actually met a dassen *at all* before.... No; he was sure that he'd only seen them in books. 'Not that I recall.'

'Oh, that's sad, you would have liked him! He was—'

'Ka'harja!' Sken's voice called over Stars, and Ka'harja turned around and waved to the woman. 'We've been here all morning and I don't think there's much left. We should get moving!'

'Yeah, we've gotten everything that was important!' he replied.

'You heard him!' Sken shouted, even louder than when she'd been talking to Ka'harja. 'Let's go!'

Ka'harja stood dumbly as the people around him began to trek back to the caravans. He was just deciding what to do when he felt Stars lean on him and start to tremble. He hadn't realised how tired she looked until now; the bags under her eyes and the shallowness in her breathing... they made her look half dead. And as he pet her on the back and let her bury her face into his shoulder, he wondered if he might have looked the same to her, when she'd saved his life all those years ago....

'I miss him,' she sighed. 'He made me feel whole. I only feel like half of myself now. Like I'm kizza real.'

'Hey, it'll be alright,' said Ka'harja. 'It will. Things can only get better, now.'

'I want to see Annanyn,' Stars told him. 'She has my Little Demon.'

'She's right there,' Ka'harja pointed. 'Do you want me to walk you to her?'

Stars shook her head. 'I'll be okay. Thank you for listening to me, Ka'harja. You're a mip friend.'

'No worries,' Ka'harja gave an anxious grin. He wasn't sure if that were true; if she'd heard what he'd been thinking about her she'd probably hate him. 'I'll be with my mum if you need me.'

Stars didn't seem to hear him as she wandered away, which was fine with him. He made his way to the healer's caravan and quickly patted himself down to get rid of as much ash as he could before going in.

The first thing that hit him was the unmistakable smell of antibiotics and infected blood.

Ka'harja nearly panicked, until he saw Coborn rubbing a salve her arm. At first she didn't see him and continued treating herself; then she noticed him staring and jumped.

'I, uh— I messed up while cooking perch for Sken a few days ago,' she explained, quickly pushing a bloody cloth off the table into a nearby bin. 'Got myself.... I thought I washed it properly but....'

'You got an abscess?' Ka'harja shuddered. 'Gross. You should put garlic on it.'

'Why i-in the name of all— All— All the gods— Why— Wou—Would she ever do — Do that!' Coff's voice exclaimed from the corner of the room. 'GARLIC?'

'My mum makes garlic salves all the time,' Ka'harja defended. 'You mix folla oil and garlic and smear it on for about ten minutes, then wash it off with some—'

'Honey salves a-are b-better,' Coff interrupted. 'Garlic bur-burns the sk-skin. And honey s-salves a-are safer for children, t-too, without the— The h-high allergy r-risk.'

Ka'harja shrugged. 'You can't lick it off, though.'

'What— Why would-ould you even— *What?!*' Coff sputtered. He frowned when Ka'harja laughed, but then sighed and pointed to a jar next to Coborn. 'Can you pass me th-that? I-I'm treating y-your mother.'

Ka'harja picked up the jar as Coborn got up to leave, and made his way over to the bed his mother lay on.

'She's asleep?' Ka'harja asked, pricking up his ears to listen to his mother's snore. 'Is she alright?'

'I d-don't know,' Coff admitted, taking the jar and carefully applying its contents to Distro's wound. 'She w-was active yest-yesterday, which is— Is good, but I want to k-kee-keep an e-eye on her and make— Make sure she doesn't g-get w-worse.'

Ka'harja sat on the bed beside Coff and ran his fingers through his mother's greasy hair. He wasn't sure how to feel. Losing his house hurt enough; he couldn't bear the thought of losing his mother, too.

'U-Use... this.'

Ka'harja looked up from his mother to find Coff holding a handkerchief out to him. At first he wondered why. Then he felt the tears rolling down his cheeks and quickly accepted the rag, which turned black with soot as he pushed it into his face and let out a sob.

Awkwardly, Coff put a hand on Ka'harja's shoulder and gave it a squeeze. 'I— I know it's h-hard, but... uh... it's going to— To be o-okay. I think. Do you—'

Ka'harja shrugged him off and sniffed back his tears. 'I don't want to talk about it anymore. I'm sorry, but everyone keeps trying to talk about it and it's just making me feel worse.'

'Oh— Y-Ye.... Okay,' Coff fiddled with the hem of his shirt for a moment, then turned and began rearranging a shelf of preserved herbs and thick books.

For a while Ka'harja quietly wept into the soot-covered cloth and Coff ignored him in the most awkward manner possible. When Ka'harja finally managed to stop crying, Coff turned back to him and held up a bottle.

'Do— Do you th-think your m-mother would drink this if we— If we woke her? There's... not much left, b-but it should help.'

Ka'harja shrugged. 'We can try, but she's stubborn and usually refuses to use anything she hasn't made herself.'

'I-I know,' Coff sighed. 'I had to w-wait until she was asleep before I could clean her w-wound. I don't know how w-we can possibly get her to dri-drink any of this—'

'Hold on,' Ka'harja interrupted, jumping to his feet. 'I'll go peel the label off some beer!'

Coff cocked his head. 'You th-think th-that will w-work?'  
'Why not? It's worked before!'

# Chapter 14

## Above a Cave, Apparently; Okatako Glif 11<sup>th</sup>, Year 10,053 AE

A week had passed since the horrific fire, and the world didn't seem to notice it had happened at all. The clouds still hung in the sky, birds still chirped, flowers still bloomed, and the river still ran strong alongside the uneven road. Ka'harja hated it. He hated that the world was so happy when he was suffering so badly.

He wanted the world to be as miserable as he was. He wanted to feel like he could justify the burning anger and hatred that was bubbling in his chest; but with the insects singing out on a sunny day full of life and cool winds he felt like the awful feeling was out of place and wrong— Like if he showed anything but joy he'd ruin the day for everyone else. And all he could do about it was lag behind the caravan and hope to be left alone to simmer in his quiet rage.

His mother was still sick. Getting worse and worse by the day. She hadn't gotten out of bed in two days, and she'd fallen back to sleep almost immediately after taking her medicine that morning. She still hadn't woken up; even for her that was too long to sleep.

Ka'harja didn't understand why this was happening. She'd won the fight. She'd gotten out of the fire. She'd been resting and taking all the medication she was supposed to. Why wasn't she getting better? She was supposed to be okay....

'Ka'harja, pick up the pace! You're going to be left behind!'

*If only*, Ka'harja let out a frustrated groan. 'I know, Lif. I'm just... tired.'

Lif dropped his pace so he was walking beside Ka'harja. 'I know you've been through a lot. I've been there. I know— And I know this is the last thing you want to hear right now, but... you need to push a little bit harder.'

'I know,' Ka'harja sighed.

'The world doesn't stop for us, and we're already travelling at less than half our usual speed. We were supposed to be making an important sale in Bokwok in a month, which we're definitely not going to make it to. I don't think Sken would be happy if we had to slow down even more—'

'I KNOW!' Ka'harja snapped. He looked away when Lif flinched. '*I know*, alright? I know.'

‘Right then,’ Lif flicked an ear and picked up his pace. ‘I didn’t mean to upset you.... We can talk more when you’re feeling up to it.’

For a moment Ka’harja wanted to shout after Lif and tell him he was sorry, but he couldn’t bring himself to speak. Instead, he felt the horrible squeezing in his chest tighten even more as guilt bubbled up inside of his gut. Lif was just trying to help; the entire caravan had been nothing but open and giving and kind to Ka’harja and his mother. Even though they definitely didn’t deserve it.... They’d stolen from them, Ka’harja had secretly mocked them, and now— Now he was acting ungrateful for the help they’d given him.

He buried his face in his hands and let out a loud, pained exclamation. Why couldn’t he just be alright? Why did he have to feel so *horrible*?

He didn’t notice the caravan ahead of him stop and walked directly into it with another loud shout. A tear rolled down his cheek and he swore at himself as he wiped it away, taking a moment to hide his pain before he continued to the middle of camp.

Trat was setting up a small fire with Coborn and Lif, though they seemed to be having trouble getting the damp wood lit.

‘What’s happening?’ Ka’harja asked. He sounded more aggressive than he meant to, so he forced himself to smile. Even though he knew it looked miserable and unnatural. ‘You, uh, making lunch?’

‘We’re hoping,’ Trat responded, clicking two small stones together. ‘If the damn fire will light! The flint’s sparking but the wood’s too damp.’

‘Light some paper or something,’ Lif suggested. ‘I have my hatchet! I’ll make some kindling—’

‘I can do it!’ Trat grumbled, smacking the small axe out of his friend’s hand. ‘I’ve made fire before!’

Coborn rolled her eyes and gave Ka’harja a look, which he easily translated into “*ugh*.”

He nodded back as the boys began arguing, and felt the guilt squeeze him again. Was Lif in a bad mood because of him? Had he upset him with his outburst earlier and ruined the day for everyone—

‘Ka’harja, stop standing around like a goat on a flagpole and tell Trat he’s being an idiot for me!’ Lif’s scoff interrupted Ka’harja’s thoughts. ‘He might actually listen to you! And if he doesn’t, you can pick him up and kick him across camp like a ball, you wolver-wannabe!’

Ka’harja actually laughed at that. Genuinely. ‘Lif’s right,’ he said as the tension in his chest loosened. ‘Kindling lights better.’

‘*Me me meh ma*,’ Trat mocked, ignoring Lif’s protests and smacking his flint and steel together like he was trying to dent a kitchen pot. ‘I know what I’m doing—’

As he said it, Baku and Koko stepped around Ka’harja. Koko dumped a heap of paper on the fire pit, and Baku held down a bright, red-hot torch and set the paper alight.

Trat stared at the fire for a long while in silence before screaming, flinging his flint and steel across the camp, and storming off in a huff.

‘Goddess in the High World *thank you!*’ Coborn exclaimed. ‘I thought that would never end!’

'I'm hungry, and Trat's an idiot,' Koko said gruffly before turning and walking away.

Baku was less eager to leave. 'How's things, Lif? Coborn? Ka?'

Ka'harja shrugged as the others had a laugh. He wasn't sure how he felt.

'Coff wants to try and restock some herbs that are supposed to grow in this area, to help with your mother's treatment,' Baku mentioned, shouldering Ka'harja. 'He wanted me to go with him but.... You're an alchemist, right? You know all that plant stuff? I think it'd be better if you helped.'

Ka'harja gave a nod. Baku was right; he'd be a much bigger help collecting herbs than a guard would. And it was something he could actually get out and do to be helpful instead of standing around feeling sorry for himself.

'He'll be leaving in a bit, you might want to go offer to help now,' said Baku. 'Let him know I'll stay here if you go.'

Again, Ka'harja nodded, and made his way to Coff's caravan. He stood outside the door for a moment, unsure whether to knock or call out, but then he heard loud arguing and decided to just open the door.

'You're g-going to make yourself worse, drinking alco-alcohol while you have an in-in-infection! Where did you— Where did— Where did even you g-get that?!' Coff ranted. 'I t-told you to st-stay in bed!'

'I'm fine!' Distro responded, taking a swig from a large bottle. 'I don't need you to babysit me! Alcohol is as good as any other medication—'

'Don't you talk that crock!' Ka'harja snapped, making Coff jump. 'Coff's not an idiot! He's a trained healer, and you're not going to fool him with a lie like that!' he stepped into the caravan and yanked the drink out of his mother's grip.

It spilt, and Distro licked what she could off her scaly arm with a frown. 'I'm a better healer than he is.'

'A more stubborn alchemist, you mean,' Ka'harja grumbled as he passed the bottle to Coff, who re-corked it and hid it in a locked drawer. 'We want you to get better, so stop being an arse and do as you're told!'

Distro rolled her eyes. 'Don't you scold me! I'm supposed to scold *you*! I'm your mother—'

'THEN START ACTING LIKE IT!' Ka'harja shouted. He didn't mean to raise his voice, and instantly regretted it. He stepped back and bit his lip as his mother stared at him. 'So-Sorry. I didn't mean to.... To....'

'Are you alright, Ka?' Distro asked softly. She sighed when her son shook his head and *thwacked* the mattress with her palm. 'Sit.'

Ka'harja sat and put his face in his hands. His mother began to untangle the leafs from his tail and, for a moment, he felt like he was twelve eclipses again, come home after falling out of a tree and spraining his wrist.

'You're alright,' she reminded him. Her gravely voice was like a flash of magic light that chased away night-monsters, and Ka'harja felt all his anxieties melt away as she continued to comfort him. 'The worst is done, now. If we get through this, we can get through anything.'

Ka'harja took a deep breath and nodded. She was right: the worst was over. It was going to be okay. All she had to do was get better.

‘Coff? Baku said you and him were going out to collect supplies,’ Ka’harja’s voice was the calmest it had been all day. ‘He said I should go with you instead, because I’m good with herbs.’

‘And fr-from the, uh, area,’ Coff nodded. ‘That’s a... a good idea. Yes. I— I’d love the help! Th-Thank you.’

‘I’ll help too,’ Distro rasped, propping herself up on her elbow. ‘I know herbs better than either of you!’

Ka’harja glared at his mother. ‘You will *not!* You’re going to stay here until we’re back. No drink. And no getting out of bed!’

‘Not at all?’ she asked, looking smug. ‘What about for the toilet?’

Coff stuck his foot under the bed and slid out a metal pan. ‘That’s, um... th-that’s what this is... for.’

Distro’s triumphant expression turned frustrated and she threw herself face-down into her pillow. She mumbled something that neither boy understood before pushing herself over and sticking her foot in Ka’harja’s face.

Ka’harja batted her leg away and threw the blanket over her. ‘Promise me, Mum.’

‘Fine! I won’t get out of bed or drink alcohol or pee on the floor until you get back. I *promise!*’

‘You won’t pee on the floor *at all!*’ Ka’harja tried to sound serious, but ending up laughing instead. ‘Alright, we should get going. Right, Coff?’

Coff nodded and the pair made their way out of camp.

As they left, Coff waved Baku over. ‘C-Can you make sure Dis-Distro gets plenty of water?’ he asked. ‘I-I won’t be gone, uh... t-too long but, um, she— She needs someone t-to keep an ey-eye on her. Oh, and uh, take the dr-drink out of my secon-second dra-drawer, would you? I’m scared she’ll b-break the l-lock to get it. You— You know where I keep the key?’

‘Sure! I’ll check on her in a minute,’ Baku winked at the healer before grabbing his ears and giving him a playful shake. ‘Anything else you need before you head out with tall-boy?’

‘No, uh... that’s a-all,’ Coff replied, pulling away from Baku. ‘Thanks.’

Ka’harja watched as hot red embarrassment crept over Coff’s cheeks.

‘What about you, tall-boy? Need anything?’ Baku grinned at him. Something about the smile made Ka’harja feel... embarrassed. But he couldn’t tell why.

He shook his head and followed Coff, who was hurrying away from the caravan.

‘Odd man, isn’t he?’ Ka’harja laughed. ‘I mean, he seems nice enough, but he’s got that air about him. Like he knows something nobody else does.’

‘He... He’s a good guy,’ Coff sighed, rubbing his red-hot cheeks and trying to hide the blush. ‘I w-wish he wou-wouldn’t tease me so much.’

Ka’harja shrugged. ‘At least it’s a good sort of teasing. It’s like what me and Mum do.’

‘R-Right. I don’t know how you, uh, handle her,’ Coff admitted. ‘She’s the most stubborn person I’ve ever— Ever met. And I— I w-work for *Sken!*’

Ka’harja stopped and glared at the man. ‘I don’t appreciate that.’

‘Wh-What?’ Coff’s blush came back in a panic and he took an anxious step away

from Ka'harja.

'Talking about my mum that way,' Ka'harja growled, crossing his arms. 'Don't do it.'

'Oh, I— I um— I didn't mean to— I offend— Uh— I— Sorry,' Coff managed. 'I just— Wanted to, uh... start a, um.... Talk. To you— I—'

'Ugh. It's fine,' Ka'harja held up a hand to silence Coff and sighed, realising he'd be brash. 'It's just that... she's one of the only people who's ever treated me *right*. You know? I don't know what I'd do without her. We're so close, we even have the same dreams sometimes.'

'The— The same dreams?' Coff sounded shocked.

'Yeah, ever since I was a kid,' Ka'harja admitted. 'She dreams a lot more than me, but when I dream, it's always the same one she had.'

'That's, uh, odd?' Coff bit his lip, sounding like he wanted to say something else. But then he turned away and pointed at a nearby copse. 'Those trees m-might have... the plants we need....'

Ka'harja shrugged and followed Coff towards the cluster of young trees. 'I wouldn't know. About the dreams I mean. The plants are probably at the trees, yeah. What exactly are we looking for, anyway?'

'Murdaro root, fal-falki leafs, hopefully s-some pulla flowers, and—' Coff was only halfway through the sentence when he crouched down and started pulling up the long grass. He carefully bound it with a thin string before putting it his satchel bag. 'And th-this.'

'Chikiti grass?' Ka'harja laughed. 'That stuff's pretty weak. You can always use mora mora root instead.'

'I— Haven't heard of th-that,' Coff admitted.

'It's from the Gallamor. I think, anyway,' Ka'harja grinned. 'Mum and I used to get it imported. Anything chikiti grass can go in, mora mora can go in, and it only costs half as much for the same dose. Even with importation fees.'

Coff quickly pulled out a notebook and scribbled down the name. 'I'll, uh, give it a tr-try sometime.'

After gathering the chikiti, they continued their search for the other plants. They chatted for a while, discussing different herbs and their uses in medicines and potions, before they split up to cover more ground. They only had to find a falki tree, now, and gather its leafs. Ka'harja hoped there was one nearby. He knew they grew near his house, but he wasn't sure if they'd spread this far out....

He ran the ingredients they'd gathered through his mind, and something seemed to click into his thoughts, though he didn't fully understand what he was thinking.

'Coff!' he called as he hurried to his companion. He slipped on a root and nearly collided with the man, but was lucky to fall flat on his face instead. He picked himself up and brushed himself down, then turned back to Coff. 'What do you need these for, anyway?'

'Just... medicine,' Coff didn't meet Ka'harja's eye, and Ka'harja felt his chest tighten.

'Baku said they were for my mum's treatment, but these aren't plants you'd

use for an infected wound,’ Ka’harja tried to brush it off, and let out a too-fake laugh. ‘They’re something you’d give a mustenel who’s used too much magic!’

Coff looked up at Ka’harja and shook his head. ‘Your m-mother has an— An *infection*,’ he said with far too hard a tone. ‘That’s a-all.’

‘Don’t lie!’ Ka’harja snapped. ‘I can tell you’re lying! What’s wrong with her?’

Coff started stammering too much to respond.

Ka’harja sighed and turned away. ‘It’s *not* an infection, is it?’

‘No it— It is!’ Coff exclaimed. ‘But it’s... not her w-wound.’

Ka’harja turned back. ‘What?’

‘My mentor— She called it alchemist’s wheeze,’ said Coff. ‘I thought you would — That you might have re-recognised it, b-being an alchemist your-yourself.’

‘I haven’t heard of it,’ Ka’harja frowned. ‘It doesn’t sound like an infection.’

‘It’s from— From inhaling t-too much magical resi-residue,’ Coff explained. ‘While working on p-potions. The— The powdered ingredients get in-into the lungs and cause in-infections and... worse. Magical sicknesses that— That are hard to treat. It’s— It’s common when alchemists don’t follow the, uh, b-basic safety precautions while w-working.’

‘Boring safety precautions aren’t my mum’s way,’ Ka’harja grunted. ‘And they’re not my way, either. It’s too much bother for not actually changing anything—’

‘It’s— It’s a lazy hab-habit that’s made her s-sick! You’re luck-lucky you’re not si-sick, t-too!’ Coff snapped, pointing an accusing finger at Ka’harja. ‘If she’d just— Just bothered to put a cl-cloth over her mouth, she wou-wouldn’t be *dying*!’

Ka’harja flinched at the last word, and Coff covered his mouth.

‘No— I mean— She’s not going to—’ Coff couldn’t find his words. ‘W-We can still... help her. W-We just need to m-make the tr-tr-tr-treatment.’

Ka’harja barely heard him. He felt like he’d been struck in the gut. *Hard*. He had to sit down. But there were no seats.... He ended up dropping onto his side in the grass and curling up.

‘I— I’m sorry,’ Coff reached out a hand, but pulled it back at the last moment. ‘P-Please don’t— Don’t cry. Ka’harja? Don’t— Please don’t. I-I’m sorry.’

It was too late. Ka’harja couldn’t stop himself. The tears he’d been holding onto all week came spilling out of him all at once as he lay in the long grass.

He could hear himself, half-screaming like he was in physical pain— And he was. He cried so hard his chest ached and his stomach cramped, and then he threw up and all he could taste was a sickly, acidic bile, which just made him want to cry even more.

‘Ka’har— Ka’harja?’ Coff finally put his hand on Ka’harja’s shoulder. ‘Ka’harja, I’m— I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to, uh— To snap. Your mother’s g-going to get b-better.’

Ka’harja pushed himself to his knees and tried desperately to steady his breathing. ‘She’s— She’s not though, is she?’

‘She w-will.’

‘She’s gotten worse!’

Coff shook his head. ‘She— She’s just b-been t-tired— But she’s been— Been getting b-better. Didn’t you h-hear her to-today? Her voice wasn’t s-so b-bad. And s-she wasn’t coughing at all.’

*That was true*, Ka'harja realised. His mother hadn't sounded so bad when he'd taken the drink off her. She'd been more energetic than yesterday, and her voice was almost normal again.... But he was still worried. She still couldn't get out of bed. What if she *didn't* get better?

He swallowed the thought, and eventually calmed down enough to realise how much his head ached. He groaned and clutched it tightly.

'H-Here,' Coff held out a flask. 'Water will.... Water will help.'

Ka'harja took it, and nearly drank the whole thing without thinking.

'Are— Are you alright?' Coff asked. 'I'm... sorry.'

Ka'harja shook his head. 'It's not your fault,' he admitted. 'I've been feeling like shit all day. This was just... the toppling card on the tower....'

Coff rested his head on Ka'harja's shoulder, and it took him a moment to realise he was getting a hug. When he did, he leant into it and took a deep breath; surprised by how much it was helping.

The pair sat together for a moment, until Ka'harja sighed.

'Thank you,' he mumbled. He was feeling better. Not perfect, but better than he had before coming out. 'We should keep looking....'

'R-Right,' Coff agreed, getting to his feet and offering Ka'harja his hand.

Ka'harja took it and let Coff help pull him up—

But then, as he tried to stand, the ground under his foot split and his leg caught in the dirt. A horrible memory flashed in Ka'harja's mind before the ground gave way and he felt himself falling.

*Ga'oa!*

He collided with hard stone, but he didn't stop moving; instead he lurched sideways and down again, sliding down a steep passage until everything was dark. And then he slid even further, until the world lit up again and the ground flattened out and he slowed to a stop.

He was glad he'd thrown up earlier; if he hadn't, he was sure he'd have done so on the way down.

He waited for his head to stop spinning before he tried to stand. Halfway to his feet, Coff smacked into him with a loud grunt and both boys slid further across the smooth cave floor.

'Great Star,' Ka'harja mumbled into Coff's leg. 'Where are we?'

Coff hiccuped in response and rolled over. 'I... think... I'm... going to be s-sick.'

Ka'harja sat up and pet him on the back. 'Go ahead, I won't tell.'

Coff let out a groan and puked on the stone. He choked for a moment, then flopped down to the side and rolled away from his sick.

Ka'harja didn't bother to move and instead stared up the tunnel they'd fallen down; there was nothing but black. Not even a light at the end.

He let his head drop back onto the stone. 'Fuck me.'

'Alright,' Coff moaned absent-mindedly.

For a moment, Ka'harja was stunned, then he gave a little laugh. 'Yeah, we *are* alright, aren't we?'

Coff sighed and tried to push himself up. 'I— I th-think so.'

'No broken bones?' Ka'harja asked, taking Coff's arm and pulling him up. 'Damn,

that was my plan all along. Invoke the planet's wrath and kill us both!

Coff chuckled as Ka'harja helped him to his feet. The boys stumbled for a moment before finally starting to get their bearings in the dark cave. It was huge; the roof stood tall enough that Ka'harja could stand on his own shoulders five or six times and still not reach it. Lining the roof were tiny crystals that shone like stars in the darkness.... It was almost like they were still outside, but had been tugged through time into night.

'Soulstone,' Ka'harja finally caught his breath and cursed the flesh-eating crystal. 'It's all over the floor, too! We're fucked if we stay here!'

'Never s-sleep near-ear so-soulstone,' Coff stammered, wringing his hands anxiously as his voice broke. 'H-How do we ge-get out?'

Ka'harja looked around. There were hundreds, if not thousands, of tunnels out of the main room. Some were too high to reach— Some were hidden in the floor, only visible because of their dim glow. Some led down; others led up. Some went straight.... None looked like they led out.

'It's anybody's guess,' Ka'harja shrugged. The tunnel they'd come in through was far too steep to climb. 'But I don't want to stay here and become a statue, we should go.'

Coff nodded and followed Ka'harja through the caves.

'At least we can see,' Ka'harja sighed. 'Though I don't like the idea of slowly being turned into a magical rock— Ew. Perfect example of what I *don't* want to be!'

The cave was a dead-end, and at the end lay a large crystal elk. The lower half looked like it belonged to a sleeping deer, but the face— The face was contorted into a terrified scream. Ka'harja scrunched his nose into a grimace as he thought about the poor creature's slow death. It wouldn't have known what was happening until it couldn't move it's lower half; waking up and realising it was turning into soulstone.... It was no wonder Har'pies cursed the underground caves. Star-shining rocks and soul-eating goblins....

'Let's get out of here,' Ka'harja pushed his memories of Har'py tales to the back of his mind and nudged Coff away from the elk statue. *Goblins aren't monsters*, he reminded himself. *They're intelligent. Sapient. And they don't eat people's souls!* He shook his head to try and clear it.

'Are— Are you al-alright?' Coff asked, breaking into Ka'harja's thoughts.

'Are *you*?' Ka'harja chided. He groaned when Coff jumped. 'Sorry. I'm... really *not* okay. I can't stop thinking of... bad things. Har'py things. I'm freaking out a little.... Can we try talking?'

Coff nodded, pausing to think for a moment. 'So... y-you said you, uh, h-have the same dreams as your m-mother?'

Ka'harja nodded. 'Always the same ones. Otherwise I just don't dream. I don't know what's up with it—'

'It's dream walking!' Coff exclaimed. 'It's— That's what dr-dream walking is. You don't— Don't d-dream unless it's someone else's dream. You... had an Eigh-Eight Star t-tapestry in your house... how did you n-not... realise....'

Ka'harja stopped and stared at Coff for a long while. Then he laughed and continued walking. 'I'm not a dream master! I'm not *that* special!'

'*B-By the M-Moons, he's as st-stubborn as his m-mother,*' Coff whispered under his breath.

Ka'harja didn't bother to respond, and let him think he'd gone unheard. But the thought of his mother made him anxious. 'So, what's alchemist's wheeze like? How long has she had it for?'

'Years,' said Coff. 'But I— I think the tr-trauma from the sm-smoke triggered the severe stages. H-How d-did you not n-notice how bad her breathing was getting? The changes in her v-voice alone would have—'

'I noticed that she sounded different!' Ka'harja snapped. He softened his tone when Coff flinched. 'I told her, but she said she was alright. I didn't know that it was because she was sick— How *could* I have known? All I know is what she's taught me.'

The sound of Coff's sigh said more than he could have managed with words. It pierced Ka'harja painfully, and he decided that it was best to end their conversation there.

They continued wandering the caves for what they could only assume was hours. Ka'harja ached, and Coff didn't sound much better as he panted and staggered along. They needed to rest but... they couldn't. Not with so much soulstone around.

Ka'harja looked into a smaller cave as they passed, only to realise it was completely black inside. His heart skipped a beat. *A dark cave meant no soulstone!* They could sit down and rest!

He grabbed Coff's shoulder and turned him into the cave. Only three or four steps in, the healer collapsed on the floor and curled up. Ka'harja dragged him a little further before lying down nearby.

'It's c-cold,' Coff mumbled.

Ka'harja agreed, and shifted until they were back-to-back. He could feel Coff shivering, and after a moment turned around and put an arm around him, trying to keep him warm.

'Th-Thank you,' Coff managed. 'I'm so t-tired. And hun-hungry.'

'Me too,' agreed Ka'harja, curling into his companion. He'd been looking forward to lunch, but now he lay here, hours later, exhausted and cold and tired and feeling like shit. 'Let's get some sleep.'

# Chapter 15

## An Underground Cave; Okatako

Glif 11<sup>th</sup>, Year 10,053 AE

Ka'harja couldn't tell how much time passed before Coff's breathing evened out; it felt like an entire day had gone by just lying in the dark. *Had* it been a day yet? He was so tired... yet he couldn't sleep. All he could do was listen to the *drip-drip-drip* of far-off water, and the scrabbling of... rats, maybe? Something small and light and fast. Too far away to matter.

He shuffled closer to Coff and tried to steal what little warmth he could from the man.

He was finally drifting off when he realised the strange cave ambience was growing stranger. The rat's scrabbling was getting closer. And more frantic. Behind it, a heavier shuffling noise resounded— Like feet being dragged along the floor on their way to bed. A hiss, and then a high-pitch squeal of pain sounded through the cave. It was cut off abruptly by a crunch, falling pebbles, and loud laughter.

Coff sat bolt upright and let out a shriek of his own. Ka'harja quickly covered his mouth with a hand to muffle him, but it was too late. The cave had gone completely silent except for the dripping water.

A feeling of dread washed over Ka'harja as the quiet shuffling came back. He leant over Coff and held his breath; perhaps whatever it was wouldn't see them in the darkness? He wasn't sure how long he could cope— His heart was beating so hard it was impossible to hear anything else.

Then a shadow appeared at the cave entrance and both boys tensed. It was grotesque. Humanoid, but its silhouette was twisted; hunched over like an ugly, malnourished monkey with a bobble-head that was fitted wrong.

The only consolation for Ka'harja was that it was tiny. It was barely the size of a foxen man; only half the height of Coff and twice as thin, in its crouched form. He could kick it away easily and bolt—

A second shadow appeared and Coff's grip on Ka'harja tightened. Ka'harja didn't dare to breathe. No matter how much his chest hurt.

As he watched, the second silhouette slowly raised a limp form to its mouth and a sickening crunch filled the cave.

The first creature turned abruptly and smacked its companion. 'THAT'S MINE AS MUCH AS YOURS!' it shouted.

Ka'harja took this chance to let out his breath and take another.

'I caught it!' the second creature complained. 'You were too busy drinking to see it!'

'We agreed to share all our food! I've been sharing mine with you! Don't you dare not share with me!'

'I haven't eaten the whole thing, Kerkek, you dried up slug!' the second creature hit its companion back. 'I took *one* bite!'

'A big one, too, I bet! You never share, Duk! You never share with me! Mother would be ashamed!'

'Don't bring Mother into this!' Duk responded. 'She'd tell you to stop throwing a tantrum and go hunt for yourself!'

Ka'harja nearly laughed at the outburst; the arguing was childish, if not absolutely ridiculous, and his fear ebbed away. He gave a small cough and the cave fell silent.

'Hello?' Kerkek questioned the darkness. 'Gilip? Is that you? I'll rip your nose off if you're hiding in shadows again!'

'I'm not Gilip,' Ka'harja chuckled. 'My name's Ka'harja.'

'Kar-har-sa?' Duk snickered. 'That's not goblin! What are you? An orc? A kobold? Some sort of weird soft-flier who's learned how to speak with their mouth instead of their hands?'

'Kah-har-ja,' Ka'harja corrected. 'And I'm foxen.'

'Ooh, I *love* foxens!' Kerkek exclaimed. 'You up-worlders all so *quirky*! Is it only you in there?'

Coff tugged on Ka'harja's arm, desperately trying to keep him from saying anything else; but Ka'harja figured honesty would be best in this situation.

'I'm with a friend,' he said. 'We're lost.'

'Well come out of the shadows! Come out of the shadows!' Kerkek's exaggerated motions made him look even more chimp-like as he scrambled to stand upright. 'Let's get a look at you and see if we can't make a deal!'

'A deal?' Ka'harja asked, tugging the resisting Coff out of the cave with him. 'What do you mean "a deal"?''

'Well, directions don't come free!' Duk cackled. 'You pay for what you get!'

'Pl-Please don't h-hurt us,' stammered Coff.

Duk and Kerkek stared at the boys as they came into the soulstone-lit passageway... and the boys stared back at the goblins. They weren't so bad, up close. They had skin as green as a secas, dotted with warts and out of place hairs— But their smiles were wide and their eyes surprisingly sweet as they looked the boys over.

'Wow,' Kerkek exclaimed. 'You're a tall one!'

'Attractive, too,' Duk gave a wistful sigh and started to fan herself with her hand. 'It's a shame you're a couple, or I might have made the payment marriage!'

'We're not—' Ka'harja didn't finish the sentence before Coff stamped on his foot. His voice broke, but he barely missed a beat when he realised the second half of

Duk's sentence. 'Very rich! We don't have any money on us.'

'Come again?' Kerkek cocked his head and scratched a few large pimples on his chin.

'W-We d-don't have any m-money,' Coff managed. He dug through his pockets. 'I only h-have, uh, th-three gold—'

'Why would we want *gold*?' Duk frowned. 'There's a nugget the size of a bear a few hundred meters down.'

'Useless lump of metal!' Kerkek agreed.

'Then what *do* you want?' Ka'harja bit his lip. There wasn't really too much they could give them.

'I'm glad you ask!' Kerkek started down the cave, motioning for the others to follow. 'We —my sister and I— are artists!'

'And not just your mediocre rock-carvers, either!' Duk cried happily. 'We're *soulstone* carvers!'

Ka'harja laughed, trying to keep the two in a good mood with conversation. The goblins were their only chance out of the caves; they couldn't risk being abandoned. 'I thought that was a felinic art!'

'It is, it is!' Kerkek chuckled. 'We learnt it in the Gallamor!'

'Oh! You've been to the Gallamor?' Ka'harja hoped his interest didn't sound too fake. He couldn't care less about foreign countries at the moment. All he cared about was getting back above ground.

'We've been all over the planet! Even up past Sunscare!' Duk exclaimed. She met Ka'harja's eye and gave an exaggerated flutter of her lashes that turned his stomach. 'We're cultured, you know. We sell our art to all kinds of people across the world!'

'Yes! And not just art! Items too!' Kerkek motioned to a small cave with a flick of his wrist. 'That's our studio, go in. We'll join you in a second.'

Duk looked confused. 'We're not going in? Why?'

'I'm hungry!' Kerkek complained. 'I'm going to go hunt something!'

Duk threw the headless rat at him. 'Eat that, I want to start carving!'

Grumbling like a child through a mouthful of rodent, Kerkek pushed past his sister and into the crevice, where he disappeared into the cave beyond.

Coff was next, following nervously. He gave Ka'harja a look as he entered; a mix of terror and frustration. Ka'harja could almost hear the man's thoughts.

*If we die, I'm going to kill you!*

'Go on, handsome!' Duk exclaimed, planting her hand on Ka'harja's butt. 'Wish I was carvin' this!'

Ka'harja felt like his internal organs were going to fail on him just to save him from the embarrassment of the situation. He'd barely managed to enter the cave when Kerkek was upon him, shoving animal skulls in his face.

'This is from a rabbit we killed in Tcku! And this one is a dragon skull from under Yjula!' Kerkek flashed the skulls so quickly Ka'harja barely had time to see them.

Duk started jumping up and down in excitement. 'NO! NO! I KNOW ONE HE'LL LIKE!'

Before Ka'harja could refuse, a skull was thrust into his arms. He didn't want to look at it, and at first kept his eyes on Coff, who looked faint with worry as he stared at what the goblins had pressed into Ka'harja's arms.

Slowly, Ka'harja forced himself to look. He was expecting something like a dog skull, or maybe the skull of another goblin with the way Coff was staring.... He screamed when he saw it and instinctively dropped it.

Kerkek caught it with a laugh 'Got this about nine years ago from under Heck'ne!' he exclaimed. 'Ripped it right out of a foxen's head, we did!'

'He was dying, anyway,' Duk shrugged, and waved a hand to dismiss Ka'harja's sputtering. 'We just... finished him quickly. He barely knew it was happening!'

There was a *thump* as Coff fell to the floor, unconscious.

Ka'harja quickly dropped to his knees and tried to revive him; unsure how the goblins would react. He heard them whispering and twitched an ear to listen.

*'If he's dead, I have dibs on his brain,'* Kerkek whispered to his sister.

*'If he's dead, I have dibs on his boyfriend!'* Duk whispered back.

It took a second, but Coff's eyes fluttered open and he groaned. Ka'harja helped him sit, supporting his weight with the back of his hand.

Kerkek flashed the skull in Coff's face with an impish grin. 'You want to buy it?'

'No, thank you,' replied Ka'harja. 'We're not into bones.'

'Suit yourself,' Kerkek replied. He rolled the skull away like a ball and turned to his sister. 'Which do you want?'

'I want the tall one!' Duk exclaimed. 'I want to memorise every nook and cranny on that handsome face of his.'

'Can we just get this over with?' Ka'harja sighed.

*'Pshht, fine,'* Kerkek rolled his eyes. 'Sit still.'

# Chapter 16

## Leaving the Goblin's Workshop; An Underground Cave Glif 11<sup>th</sup>, Year 10,053 AE

Ka'harja had to admit: the goblins were skilled artists. The statues were impressively made. Accurate, smooth, and detailed; they almost looked like actual people who'd been absorbed by the rock.

And the goblins hadn't been rude while carving. They'd held quite pleasant, if not odd, conversation.... In fact, the worst part of the whole experience for Ka'harja was watching Duk try to impress him by bending backwards so far she'd folded herself in half and stuck her head between her legs.

'And that's the exit,' Kerkek pointed. 'Leads you right to the river. Don't trip on your way out!'

'Or do, and fall into my arms,' Duk gave a wistful sigh, her chest heaving with the breath.

'You'd be crushed,' Kerkek grumbled.

'Only physically!' she snapped back. Then she turned to Ka'harja and gave what looked like it was *supposed* to be a seductive wink. 'If he leaves, the emotional burden may be too much.'

Ka'harja took a deep breath and gave an awkward wave. 'See you... later.'

'Ka'harja!' Coff called from down the cave. 'Ka'harja, it's the m-middle of the n-night!'

'What?!' Ka'harja exclaimed, hurrying to his companion's side. He stared out the cave's opening into the dark, cloudy night and cursed viciously.

'Is something the matter?' Duk asked, stalking up to the boys in a strange, chimp-like stance.

Ka'harja nodded. 'We've wasted the whole day in this cave! We were supposed to be collecting herbs!'

'For your sickly mother?' she clicked her tongue sadly. 'Oh dear. Maybe we can help?'

'It won't be free,' Kerkek hissed, shoving his sister and lowering his voice. '*We already gave them cheap directions!*'

*Cheap?* Ka'harja almost laughed. They'd spent hours posing for the artists and only gotten twenty minutes of guidance in return. That certainly wasn't—

'I KNOW IT WON'T BE FREE!' Duk snapped. Then she coughed and shook herself down, returning to her sweet tone as she turned to the boys. 'I'm so sorry about my brother, he's insensitive.'

'Ay, I was raised near the surface, what do you *want* from me?' rolling his eyes, Kerkek pushed himself up straight, almost doubling his height as he addressed the boys. 'What herbs do you want?'

'Just falki lea-leafs,' Coff mumbled. 'Half a jar should do.'

'Half a jar?' Duk frowned. 'What size jar are we talking about?'

'W-Wolven medical standard—' he cut off when the goblins shrugged and pulled faces. 'Um, I mean, a l-litre jar.'

'Oh, we can fill that easy!' Duk exclaimed. 'Falki leafs are great for making tattoo ink with, and Nappo always keeps them around.'

'But that means you *definitely* have to pay us upfront,' Kerkek explained. 'Something he'd trade for.... Duk? What's he like?'

'Meat. Bugs. Fingers. Hair—'

'My ponytail!' Coff exclaimed, tugging a knife out of his pocket. 'Pl-Please, take it, and g-get us the h-herbs from— From Nappo!'

Ka'harja almost gagged as the blade sliced through Coff's long, golden half-braid. His hair was as long as he was tall! And now he'd cut it off above the tie, leaving him with a messy almost-nothing style. He held it out to the goblins, who considered it seriously.

'That's a bit... much for a jar of herbs, don't you think?' Kerkek frowned. 'We don't want to overcharge. We have a reputation to keep.'

'Then g-give us s-something el-el-else w-with it!' Coff snapped through grit teeth, the remnants of his anxious self disappearing in his frustration. He was almost like an entirely different person. 'A statue or s-something!'

'A statue of what?' Duk asked.

'I d-don't c-care! *Surprise me!*'

Duk looked to her brother, who nodded, and then hurried down the cave with Coff's ponytail.

She returned quickly, though the wait felt like forever to Ka'harja. He wanted to get back to his mother. And eat something; he was starving.

'Here is your jar,' Duk held out the herbs to Coff, who examined them closely. 'And your statue. It's a falcon. Though it's old. A few chips and not the best made; it looks a bit like a pigeon, if you ask me.'

Ka'harja took the statue from her. He tried not to cringe as she ran her hand over his own, and forced himself to smile. 'We should go.'

'I'll see you again, won't I?' Duk asked. 'You're too cute to vanish into the night!'

Ka'harja bit his lip. He hoped he never saw her again, but he wasn't going to tell her that. 'Maybe. I mean, you're travellers! So who knows what'll happen.'

Duk seemed satisfied with this answer; her brother did not. He grabbed her arm and pulled her down the tunnel, mumbling in their native tongue as she protested.

‘Don’t be a scrumble-butt!’ he snapped as they turned down a side cave.

‘I’M NOT A SCRUMBLE-BUTT!’ Duk shrieked, and the pair’s heavy footsteps slapped down the tunnel as they chased each other and argued.

‘Let’s g-g-go,’ Coff’s sigh made Ka’harja jump. He sounded exhausted.

Ka’harja nodded and stumbled into the long grass ahead of his friend.

‘Whoa!’ Ka’harja exclaimed, his foot sending a flurry of rocks rolling into the river. ‘Careful! It’s steep, and the river’s closer than I thought!’

Coff carefully made his way to Ka’harja and the two looked around for a moment, getting their bearings. It was almost pitch black; the clouds covered all but the smallest shimmer of the pink moon and the water reflected nothing in the night.

Ka’harja felt a surge of panic; they were lost! They were—

‘Th-There’s a l-light over there,’ Coff exclaimed, and Ka’harja strained to see which direction he was facing. ‘I think i-it’s th-the camp.... If not, um... at least we’ll find s-someone, right?’

‘Yeah,’ Ka’harja agreed, brushing his tail against Coff; as much for the healer’s comfort as for his own. ‘It’s our best bet.’

Before he could start across the field, he felt Coff’s hand enclose around his. Well, he *hoped* it was Coff’s hand and that Duk hadn’t come back. He felt an anxious squeeze as Coff pressed against him and let out a long breath.

‘You alright?’

‘Yeah, I j-just don’t w-want to g-get separated,’ Coff stuttered, sounding more like himself.

Ka’harja nodded, and the two made their way towards the small light in the distance.

They were halfway there when they heard Koko give a shout:

‘TRAT, IF YOU DON’T GET THAT LOG OUT OF YOUR ARSE I’LL PULL IT OUT MYSELF!’

Ka’harja finally felt like he could breathe again. He didn’t even realise he had broken into a run until Coff let go of his hand and trailed behind at a distance.

He nearly slammed into a caravan in his haste to get back to his mother. He veered to the side to avoid it— And collided with Sken.

‘Where in the everlasting expanse of the darkest corners of the sky have you been!’ she snapped. ‘We thought— HEY! Come back here! I’m not done with you, Ka’harja! Coff? COFF! Get back here! Don’t ignore me you— Coff!’

Ka’harja nearly leapt up the stairs to see his mother; she jolted upright when he burst through the door and collapsed in a heap on the floor.

‘Ka’harja!’ Distro exclaimed, rolling out of bed and grabbing her son in a hug. ‘I was so worried! *Where* have you *been*?! Are you okay? You’re not hurt are you? Have you eaten? You’re covered in dirt! You look like you fell in a hole!’

‘Spot on,’ Ka’harja mumbled, rolling onto his back as Coff stepped over him and dropped his satchel on his workbench. ‘I fucking.... I hate goblins. I *hate* them!’

Distro leant over him and kissed his cheek. ‘Tell me everything.’

‘Yes! Tell us *everything*!’ Sken panted from the doorway. ‘Explain why we had to miss an entire day of travel because a “twenty-minute” scavenger hunt took over *eight hours*!’

‘Eight hours?’ Ka’harja swallowed. ‘That’s how long we were gone?’

‘At least!’ Sken growled. ‘We stopped counting when the clouds got too thick to see the time!’

Ka’harja gave a pathetic whine. ‘I’m hungry.’

Sken’s entire body seemed to shrink as she sighed, her gills squealing, and she sat on Distro’s abandoned bed. She rubbed between her eyes for a moment before flicking the barb on her tail and jumping up. ‘I’ll get Coborn to make you boys some dinner, and then you can tell us what happened,’ she paused at the door. ‘I’m glad you’re both okay. Don’t you *dare* worry us like that again!’

# Chapter 17

## Coff's Bed; Coff's Caravan Glif 12<sup>th</sup>, Year 10,053 AE

The next morning was painful. Both physically and emotionally.

Ka'harja didn't want to get out of bed; but his mother didn't give him a choice. She was awake before him, a rare occurrence, and *thwopped* him with her pillow until he got the hint and moved his leg off her tail. She climbed over him like she was scaling a large rock and landed heavily on the floor.

'Where a-are you g-going?' Coff yawned into his book. 'You shouldn't b-be getting out of b-bed.'

'Well I'm gonna; unless you want me to shit on the floor!' Distro snapped back, cocking her head and pursing her lips as she met the healer's eye.

Coff flicked an ear and clicked his tongue. 'Ah. Um, alright. D-Don't wander off again, th-though.'

Distro opened the door and the chill air hit Ka'harja like the horrible realities of the previous week flooding back to him. He tried to shake the thoughts out of his head as he sat up and wrapped his blanket around himself tightly in an attempt to conserve heat. He wished he'd worn more than his shorts to bed; but after last night, there'd been so much dirt in his clothes they'd become too itchy to wear comfortably, and he didn't have another shirt to change into.

He glanced at Coff, sitting in his chair in nothing but his underwear and sleeveless undershirt, and shook his head. Something seemed off about the healer, but he couldn't put his finger on it. Something about the way he was sitting, maybe? With his feet on the table and his book in his lap?

Ka'harja sighed, trying to ignore whatever his head was telling him he missed, and licked his lips anxiously. 'Aren't you cold?'

'Mm? O-Oh no, I, uh, don't feel the c-cold too much,' Coff stammered. 'Actually I'm, um, a b-bit too hot. I'm— My pa was wolvern, so...'

'Oh, that explains your skin, then,' Ka'harja blurted. 'I was wondering why you were so pale. I mean, you're not as pale as my mum, of course. Her dad was wolvern, too.'

'Yeah, sh-she said,' an awkward quiet followed Coff's shrug, only broken by the

boys outside *whooping* in excitement and shouting something at Distro. Coff bit his pencil as he turned around and leant his elbows on the back of his chair. 'Are *you* part wolveren? Your mother —your biological one— sh-she looked foxen, but you're a lot taller than her.'

'My parents were twins,' Ka'harja sucked the air through his teeth and grinned anxiously. 'I come from a long line of Har'pies.'

Coff looked away. 'I-I'm sorry, I d-didn't th-think about— Forgot— I'm s-s-sor—'

'It's fine,' Ka'harja told him, waving a hand dismissively. 'Forgetting is a good thing. I'm glad people don't look at me and think "Har'py" you know?'

Coff took a deep breath. 'It must b-be h-hard to have your her-heritage.'

'I like to think of myself as a Nigelle,' Ka'harja admitted. 'Kay'oten may be my *biological* mother, but Distro's my *real* mum. Besides, what's better than seven generations of travelling prostitutes for grandmothers?'

Coff choked, covering his mouth so he didn't laugh. 'Seven g-generations?'

'At least seven; we have no idea how many more because the family history got lost in a raid when my great-great-great grandmother was travelling through Dohl.'

'Distro's family is from the Yali conti-tinent?' Coff gave an excited half-laugh. 'So's mine— The, uh, wolveren side. My grandfather moved to Canis from, um, T-Turent!'

'We can trace our history back to Kutu,' Ka'harja grinned. 'If you follow mother-to-mother, that is. She also has some Gorut blood in her on one of her grandfather's sides, though it's... pretty far back.'

'W-Wow, they really d-*did* tr-travel,' Coff chuckled.

Ka'harja couldn't help grinning at him; without his anxieties, Coff held himself quite well. And it was nice to see his smile. It was an unusual one, with one gold tooth and another missing, but it was friendly— And it looked better on him than his wide-eyed anxiety. Seeing Coff relax made Ka'harja feel better about his own nervous thoughts. Like he could be like Coff, and calm himself down enough to enjoy himself.

'What abou-about your grandpa's s-side? Distro's father,' Coff asked. 'What... What's h-he like?'

'Well, I've never actually *met* my granddad, but Mum said he raised her since she was six or seven,' he explained. Coff snickered as Ka'harja's tail began to wag and he slammed a hand down on it to try and stop it moving, feeling himself blush; he usually had good control over himself but talking about his grandparents always got him excited. 'Apparently he's rich. She told me why once, but I can't remember what it was for the life of me.... I think I was too Har'py to understand the words, back then. But, him and his wife buy Mum literally everything she could ever want, even when she tells them not to. They send me gifts, too. Though they don't seem to know much about me— But it's great that they care about me enough to send me things! It's usually fancy clothes and jewellery —which you can probably tell I'm not into— but I keep it all anyway. I have an entire box of...'

Coff's smile disappeared as Ka'harja trailed off.

The break in his voice was enough to make the room feel colder and smaller than it had felt before. 'I mean.... I... *had*... an entire box of silken socks with floral

patterns and dragons sewn into them....’

They sat in silence.

Then Ka’harja felt the tightness in his chest returning as his lower jaw began to tremble. A gurgled sob escaped him, and he burst into tears.

That was the exact moment that Distro kicked the door open.

‘WHO WANTS SOME FUCKING SOUP?!’ she exclaimed, her voice as rough as the door’s squeaky hinges. ‘I HAVE SEVEN BOWLS— Ka’harja? Sweetheart? Are you alright?’

He wasn’t. He wasn’t alright; nothing was alright! And nothing was going to be alright, ever again!

*‘I want to go home!’* he sobbed at the floor. *‘I just want to go home!’*

His mother hurriedly deposited her armful of bowls on Coff’s desk and pulled her son into a hug. ‘I know, Sweetheart. I want to go home, too. But it’s going to be okay. I promise it’s all going to be alright.’

Ka’harja shook his head. ‘How? We’ve lost everything!’

‘We haven’t lost each other,’ Distro rasped, her already crackly voice breaking. ‘We’ve lost a lot, but not *everything*.’

It didn’t feel true. It felt like a lie, even though he knew it wasn’t. They had no home anymore. What were they supposed to do? How could anything *ever* be okay again?

His mother’s hand rubbed down his back and he felt himself let out a shudder. A part of him knew she was right, but he couldn’t seem to convince the rest of himself to listen. He closed his eyes and tried to will away the sadness. He still had his mother. He hadn’t lost her. Was he even allowed to be sad when he’d been lucky enough for her to survive? Or was he just *trying* to be upset?

‘Once we get to Kokako Boaka, I’ll write to my father, okay?’ Distro lifted her son’s face so she could look him in the eye, and tenderly wiped away his tears. ‘He’ll send us some money so we can get settled. And we can start over again. It won’t be the same living in town, I know, but who knows! It might be fun. We’ll make new friends and go to bars and get drunk— And we can graffiti on people’s letterboxes if we don’t like them.’

Ka’harja felt a laugh escape him as his mother leant in close.

*‘And imagine all the houses we can break into,’* she whispered so quietly he nearly missed it. *‘All the new things we can steal.’*

Another laugh found its way through Ka’harja’s sobs and he pulled away from his mother and wiped his nose on his arm.

She grabbed the crooked bridge between two fingers and shook his head side-to-side. ‘Now, are you going to stop being a sook and eat breakfast, or do I have to give you another hug?’

Ka’harja couldn’t help but giggle. He inhaled, deep and calming, and opened his arms for his mother. She squeezed him tightly and he felt his grief escape his body alongside his breath.

When they pulled away, Distro turned and grabbed a bowl of soup off Coff’s workbench. She passed it to Ka’harja, who dipped a finger in. It had gotten cold while they’d talked, but it still smelt alright. He downed the bowl easily, and Distro passed

him another.

‘Coff? Aren’t you going to eat?’ Distro asked.

Coff shook his head. ‘I ate b-before you got up.’

‘More for me, then,’ Ka’harja sniffed, downing his third bowl. ‘What about you, Mum?’

‘I had breakfast before coming back,’ she grinned. ‘That’s why I took so long.’

‘So you g-got him s-seven bowls to eat on his own?’ Coff frowned. ‘That’s, um... a *l-lot*.’

‘To be fair, one was for you,’ Distro scoffed. ‘And besides, if my boy’s hungry, he eats. I won’t have it any other way!’

Coff shrugged and turned back to his work. ‘D-Do you think you... I mean, uh...’

‘Do I think I what?’ Distro asked, stretching. ‘Do I think I’m hot? Yeah. I know *that’s* true.’

Ka’harja chuckled as she cast him a cheeky glance.

‘I-I mean, do you think you’ll need any, um, special a-adaptations in your m-medication?’ Coff bit his lip. ‘Being, uh, h-half dragon?’

‘Hopefully not,’ Distro’s smile disappeared and she sat next to her son. ‘I might need a higher dose. *Maybe*. If my weight has changed any. But that would about it.’

Coff mumbled something as he continued his work. Then he swore. ‘C-Can one of you help me?’ he asked. ‘I’m not, uh, used to fresh h-herbs. I-I usually get them dr-dried.’

‘Ka’harja and I use fresh herbs all the time,’ said Distro. ‘Let me see them.’

Ka’harja watched his mother stand over the healer and point. ‘The moon’s leaf is fine, but the cortcor berries are a little under-ripe, see the orange colouration? Put them in some sugar-water until they’re a brighter red.’

‘W-Will that w-work?’ amazed, Coff put the berries aside and wrote a quick note.

‘For cortcor berries it does,’ Ka’harja chimed in, leaning over the two and brushing some pale green berries away from the rest. ‘Not for the julijun, though, the sugar makes them lose their potency. You need to pick them ripe or they’re useless for anything but replanting.’

Coff nodded and scribbled down another note. ‘Wh-What about the a-acorns? I’m not s-sure if they’re o-okay or— Or if they’re going bad.’

Ka’harja picked one up and bit into it. ‘Tastes fine to me.’

The healer looked at him, horrified. ‘You’re n-not even go-going to...’

Ka’harja swallowed. ‘Not going to what?’

‘Shell them?’

Ka’harja frowned. ‘You only shell them if you’re using them for potions, I thought?’

Coff put his face in his hands and let out a long, pained sigh as Ka’harja ate the rest of the acorn, cap and all.

‘He’s like a squirrel,’ Distro snickered.

‘Squirrels do-don’t eat the sh-shells,’ Coff corrected. ‘He’s like a.... A....’

‘Compost bin?’

‘Hey, I’m right here, you know!’ Ka’harja snapped playfully, finishing the last bowl of soup. ‘Damn it.’

‘Still hungry, bin-boy?’ Distro asked. She grinned when Ka’harja nodded. ‘There was a lot more leftover. I don’t think anyone will mind if you have another bowl.’

‘You— You just had s-seven bowls of soup!’ Coff exclaimed. ‘How are you st-still wanting m-more?’

Ka’harja shrugged. ‘I always eat this much.’

Coff looked like he’d been struck. Then he shook his head. ‘You must exercise a l-lot, th-then.’

‘Nope,’ Distro cackled. ‘He’s a lazy little shit.’

Another look of confusion and horror passed over Coff. ‘Then how are you so... w-well, you’re not exactly *thin*, but... how are you n-not.... *Bigger?*’

Ka’harja shrugged. ‘Probably the same reason I’m so tall.’

‘And what reason’s th-that?’ asked Coff.

‘Drank too many fucked up potions,’ Ka’harja grinned. ‘You know I burp pink mist sometimes!’

‘You... burp pink mist?’ Coff stared, open-mouthed, for what felt like a solid minute before he pulled open a drawer and took out a notebook. ‘Ka’harja, you *have* to let me study you! Pl-Please! This is insane! I’ve never met anyone so weird— I-I mean, not w-weird, uh... I mean... y-you’re... v-very—’

‘It’s fine, I know I’m fucked up,’ Ka’harja chuckled. ‘Study away!’

# Chapter 18

## The River; A Short Distance from Camp Glif 28<sup>th</sup>, Year 10,053 AE

It was the first time since the fire that Ka'harja felt like things were actually getting better. His mother was recovering; the herbs they'd collected the fortnight before had done wonders to help her. Her voice hadn't sounded this clear in *years*. It was amazing, Ka'harja thought, that she sounded better now than before the fire.

Coff really knew what he was doing. Though the healer was nervous, he took his job seriously. He was just strict enough to keep Distro in line, without being too harsh and making her defy his orders out of spite. Several times Distro had tried to steal drinks or refused to take her medicine, and Ka'harja had walked in on Coff scolding her in a tone that almost put Koko to shame. Almost. Koko still beat Coff's stern voice whenever she was caught in her confusing relationship with Baku.

Ka'harja's thoughts jumped to the time he'd found the couple kissing by the river on their break; he'd bolted as soon as Koko had seen him, and her angry scream had made him feel like he'd aged five years—

His wandering mind was interrupted by a cold splash of water hitting him in the face. He shook himself for a moment, blinking the water out of his eyes and glaring at his mother.

'Oops,' she said in a tone so flat it made Ka'harja roll his eyes. 'Sorry, Ka, you were so spaced out... I mistook you for a log!'

Ka'harja wanted to splash her back, and wrestle, and push her head under the surface while she tugged on his ears and kicked him in the knees. But he fought against the urge. She was recovering, yes, but she wasn't better yet and the last thing she needed was to accidentally inhale the river.

Though it was tempting. Especially when she splashed him again and called him a coward.

'Ka'harja!' Stars' voice called over his mother's splashing, and he turned to see Stars running towards the river.

The exhaustion of her time in Heck'ne seemed to have disappeared since she'd joined the caravan; leaving an excited wonder as she explored the world around her with a zest Ka'harja could barely understand. Whenever Ka'harja saw her, she was

learning something new. Like reading from Baku. And cooking from Coborn. Sken was teaching her math, and she was even learning how to tend to the caravan's dragons with their grumpy old caretaker, Krarf.... She was a slow learner, but with the amount of new things for her to try it was a wonder she was able to take any of it in at all.

Dena, on the other hand, was another story. She trailed behind Stars slowly, carrying her grandson like he was the only thing keeping her from keeling over and dying where she stood. The bags under her eyes were dark; visible even from the distance between her and the river. She looked like she could collapse at any given moment and never get up again.

Stars began to strip when her mother finally caught up with her, then she leapt thoughtlessly into the river beside Ka'harja. Dena shielded Little Demon from the splash before carefully putting him down and undressing herself. She lowered herself into the cold water and let out a sigh of relief, like it had eased some sort of pain, and after a moment of quiet breathing she swam over to her daughter. Dena grabbed Stars' wrists to stop her playful splashing and tried to wash the patches of flour off her face.

Stars writhed in her mother's grasp before giving up and surrendering to the bath. 'I want to swim!' she protested.

'You can swim when you're clean,' Dena told her. 'Look at you! How did you get yourself so dirty?'

Stars quickly looked down at herself and sighed. 'I was just helping Coborn cook lunch.'

'How— Broja'kar na bakti, Stars! Sit still.' Dena gave a huff as she continued to wash her disobedient daughter, who didn't stop fidgeting until she was finally let go.

As soon as Dena had let her go Stars swam to the river's opposite bank and dropped down into the water, so only half her face was visible as she blew frustrated bubbles.

Dena just shook her head and gave a tired smile as Distro paddled over.

'Someone's in a mood,' she chuckled. 'Do you need a hand washing yourself?'

'Na. I'm alright,' Dena sighed, her smile fading. 'I'm not as dirty as I am hungry. I might get out and find something to eat.'

'I'll join you,' offered Distro, swimming to the riverbank. 'Ka'harja can watch Stars, can't you?'

'Sure,' Ka'harja nodded. 'I'll make sure she doesn't roll in the mud. Or, if she does, I'll make sure she washes it off afterwards!'

Dena clearly tried to glare at him, but she was too tired to hold it and let out a breath as Distro helped her out of the water. 'Just make sure she doesn't get miita.'

'She'll be fine,' said Distro. She began to stretch as Dena dried and dressed herself.

'You gonna get dressed?' Ka'harja scoffed. 'Or at least dry off?'

'Nah, I'm alright!' Distro grinned, starting back towards the camp. 'I'll just drip-dry. If anyone has a problem with it they can throw a towel over me themselves.'

Ka'harja watched the two mothers leave with Little Demon. They talked happily between themselves, like old friends who'd known each other for years, and Ka'harja

felt frustrated that Dena and his mother had bonded so quickly in the past few weeks. Especially when he considered the cold looks Dena gave him.

He shook his head. It wasn't Dena's fault; she'd lived with Kay'oten for... who knows how long? He could only imagine what she saw when she looked at him. He thought it must be for her like it was for him when he was young and first saw himself in a mirror.... That horrible, familiar face that wasn't quite his parents' but close enough to make him feel sick.

He sighed. He just had to be patient with Dena until she saw him as himself, and not a reminder of Heck'ne.

'That's not fair,' Stars mumbled, swimming up next to Ka'harja. 'Everyone gets to be naked except for me. He'hen.'

'You're naked now,' he pointed out.

Stars looked herself over, seeming to realise for the first time since getting in the river that she was completely nude. 'Oh. I am.... Gighi! So are you! It's like when we met!'

Ka'harja tried to smother his giggle, but failed. 'I'm going to keep washing; you should go for that swim you wanted.'

'Yi! I will!' Stars beamed. 'But, I have a question I want to ask you, first.'

'Yeah?'

'Am I speaking better?'

Ka'harja cocked his head. 'What do you mean?'

'International,' she clarified. 'Am I speaking International better? I'm trying to stop speaking Har'py so much, because it makes me think of mup times. Baku has been helping me learn but it's very hard. Am I getting better?'

'Yeah, I'd say so,' Ka'harja gave a nod. 'You've improved a lot!'

A wide grin spread over Stars' face before she turned and began to splash through the river. Ka'harja watched as she chased a lone leaf downstream— And laughed when she turned around to search for a fish that surfaced and disappeared in an instant.

She wasn't a very good swimmer. She was too thin to be buoyant, and she didn't know what to do with all her arms; but Ka'harja couldn't help being impressed by her effort as she paddled around, following anything that caught her attention.

His heart nearly stopped when she submerged— But she resurfaced close to him with a cheeky grin and he rolled his eyes at her.

'Don't scare me like that,' he told her. 'Warn me if you're going to dive—'

He cut off as Stars squirted her mouthful of water into his face. She dove out of view before Ka'harja had time to react and resurfaced behind him, spraying him again when he turned to complain.

'That's it!' Ka'harja laughed, chasing her through the water. 'When I catch you, you're going to get it!'

Stars finally found a use for her extra limbs; she was able to splash and swim at the same time, much to Ka'harja's amusement. She threw water at him as he followed her from bank to bank, only stopping when Ka'harja took a deep breath and disappeared below the surface.

'Ka'harja?' Stars mumbled. 'Where'd you go— OOOOH NOOO! NO!'

Ka'harja came up underneath her, lifting her on his shoulders and falling backwards into the water as she shrieked in joy.

They surfaced again and Stars began to pummel Ka'harja with splashes. He covered his face and tried to swim around her, but she was relentless.

*'GET IT AWAY FROM ME!'*

Ka'harja paused when he heard the shout, and motioned for Stars to stop. She didn't realise, at first, but stopped when Ka'harja waved his hand again and pricked up his ears to listen to the ruckus back at camp.

*'Scara in the High-World! Kill it! KILL IT!'*

Ka'harja leapt out of the river and tugged on his shorts, not bothering to dry himself off. Stars didn't get dressed at all as she followed him back to the caravans.

*'I'm trying to get it!'* Lif exclaimed over the other anxious voices. There was a metallic clang and a scream before Trat shouted again. *'IT WON'T— STOP MOVING! STAY! STILL!'*

Ka'harja turned the corner just as Naranako let out another one of his kettle-screams and jumped onto Felelor's back. Felelor tried to shake him off, but the terrified man clung to him like his life depended on it, and Felelor ended up nearly falling over. He bumped into Trat, who righted him and retreated a few steps away from the centre of the action until he was standing next to a frustrated Sken, who hid a terrified Annanyn behind her and tugged on Tucker's collar to stop him sprinting forward.

*'Just kill it!'* Sken ordered, struggling with her incarah. *'Squash it! For the love of Scara don't try to catch it! KILL IT!'*

Ka'harja couldn't quite see what she was telling them to squash— OH GREAT STAR! A *SLIME!*

Ka'harja backed up so far he collided with Stars and nearly tumbled down the hill. He must have let out a shout because Distro looked at him from the other side of camp and shook her head; she looked utterly disgusted by the green sludge-beast that was jumping frantically around the campfire.

*'Be careful, Ka'harja! You nearly made me fall over!'* Stars shoved Ka'harja forward just as Baku and Coff rushed past. Both of the boys were almost in tears with fear.

Coff grabbed ahold of Ka'harja and hid behind him while Baku shot up the side of one of the caravans; screaming like he was fleeing a pride of rampaging sabre cats.

*'Oh, that's really flakha,'* Stars commented. *'It's almost as big as Tucker.'*

Ka'harja felt his stomach heave as he watched the large, gelatinous blob leap around camp, trailed by Lif and Coborn. The pair wielded a large cooking pot between them, which they tried to throw over the slime several times— Never even getting close to actually catch it.

*'Get out of the way!'* Koko yelled, drawing an arrow into her bow. *'I'm going to shoot this fucker in the face!'*

*'That won't work!'* a new voice called. Ka'harja was almost amazed to hear it; he'd never heard the animal caretaker speak before, let alone shout. He hadn't even been fully sure Krarf that was *able* to speak until now. He'd forgotten about the old man, actually. *'Slimes don't have faces! Or organs! Or anything that can be hurt by*

arrows— Just leave it alone! ALL OF YOU! It'll leave if you stop making it panic!

'KILL IT!' Naranako shrieked from on top of Felelor. 'KILL IT BEFORE IT BITES SOMEONE!'

'IT'S GOT NO TEETH!' Krarf screeched back. 'JUST LEAVE IT ALONE!'

Ka'harja felt bile find its way to the back of his throat as the slime jumped towards Coborn, who shrieked and smacked it away with the oversized pot. It bounced along the ground heavily before colliding with a caravan and falling still.

'What is it?' Stars asked. 'Is it zi'kaf?'

'It's a slime,' Ka'harja managed to turn away from the quivering form of the slime long enough to look Stars in the eye. 'They're gross and— And some are poisonous and— OH GREAT STAR NO! STOP! NO!'

If it hadn't been for Coff fleeing, Ka'harja wouldn't have thought to look back at the slime. When he did, he saw it coming directly for him at a speed he'd never guessed something without legs would be able to go.

He stumbled backwards and bumped into a chair and, without thinking, grabbed it and swung it at the slime. Then he swung it again, for good measure. And again. And again. And again. He screamed and swung the chair again. Then he screamed some more, and swung the chair a few times over, until all that remained was a puddle and half a wooden leg.

'KA'HARJA! I'M *PRETTY SURE* IT'S DEAD NOW!' Sken exclaimed, putting her face in her hands. 'You can stop destroying my furniture!'

Ka'harja smacked the chair leg into the green puddle again, just to make sure, before jumping back. He didn't dare put the leg down and brandished his makeshift club above his head; terrified the slime would leap back up at him.

'It was a common grass slime,' Krarf groaned over the puddle. 'They're not dangerous at all.... They're good for the ecosystem....'

Ka'harja felt something touch his leg and jumped back; nearly swinging his club at his mother.

'That was bit excessive, don't you think?' Distro pursed her lips and shook her head.

'IT WAS COMING RIGHT AT ME!' Ka'harja didn't mean to shout, but he couldn't stop his heart from trying to escape through his mouth. 'DID YOU SEE IT? IT WAS GOING TO KILL ME!'

'Put the.... Put the piece of wood down, Ka'harja, before you hurt someone,' Distro held out her hand, and Ka'harja anxiously passed the splintered leg to her.

Just as he did Naranako collided with him, grabbing him in a hug and kissing him firmly on the cheek. Tucker began leaping around them, barking with the same energy that the man clinging to Ka'harja squealed with.

'Ka'harja! You saved us!' Naranako cheered, kissing him again. 'You're a hero, Ka'harja! You saved us all from that *monster!*'

'Some guard you are,' Felelor grumbled, peeling his nephew off Ka'harja's side. 'You're such a coward, Naranako. Get a hold of yourself would you? You're embarrassing to be related to.'

'I hope you're going to clean this up?' Sken cut in, shooing Tucker away. 'There's slime everywhere— For Scara's sake, you put out the campfire!'

Ka'harja glanced around. She was right; there was slime everywhere. The caravans and the caravaners alike were coated in thick, lumpy goo. He took a deep breath. 'Well... seeing as I was the one who killed it, I don't think I should have to clean it up?'

'I'm not doing it!' Naranako exclaimed, fleeing towards the river. 'NO! YOU CAN'T MAKE ME!'

Felelor gave an angry shout and made after him. 'NARANAKO YOU TURD!'

The other caravaners backed away anxiously, leaving Ka'harja, Stars, and Distro standing together by the puddle of slime; which Krarf was still groaning over.

'I'll help,' Stars said gently. 'I already have it all on me.'

'So will I,' Distro grinned. 'I'm not scared of a little slime—'

'No,' Coff cut in. 'Y-You should go back to bed and, uh, get s-some rest... and... you should prob-probably also p-put on some... clothes.'

'I don't need rest!' she pouted. 'And I certainly don't need clothes!'

'You kn-know I won't l-leave you alone until you l-listen to me,' Coff pressed, fumbling over his words as he stared Distro down. 'So d-do as I s-say or-or I'll— Uh —'

Ka'harja was going to say something, but his attention was drawn from the argument as Sken pulled off her jacket and threw it over Stars' shoulders.

'But won't it get slimy? I'm all slimed,' Stars asked as Sken tugged it around her tightly, doing up the first few buttons.

'It needs a clean anyway,' she replied. 'It's more important that you stay warm.'

'But it'll get slime on it,' repeated Stars.

'It's already goeey enough from me,' Sken comforted. 'A little bit more won't hurt it.'

Stars looked reluctant, but let Sken put the jacket around her anyway. It was a size too big, and didn't have enough arm holes for the poor girl, but it was thick and would keep her from getting sick in the cold weather.

Coff nudged Ka'harja gently, and Ka'harja turned to see him alone and anxious. His short hair was messed up like Distro had tried to put him in a headlock.

'You alright?' Ka'harja asked.

'Y-Your m-mother is, um, s-something alr-right,' sighed Coff, rubbing his arm, which was starting to bruise; Ka'harja made a mental note to scold his mother later. Coff caught his gaze and shrugged. 'Sh-She was being playful. I think.... She's p-promised to go to bed for a wh-while, at least.'

'Thank the Ninth god,' chuckled Ka'harja. 'You're not going to watch her?'

'Dena's gone with her an-and I, uh, w-want to help c-clean up,' Coff said. 'And m-maybe get a b-bit of the— The slime. If we can, uh, find an uncontaminated patch. Th-They can be good for pre-preparing salves.'

'Oh. Sure,' Ka'harja nodded, then glanced around.

There weren't many people still here. It was just Stars, Coff, Koko, Krarf (though he wasn't sure Krarf would be willing to help clean, as he was still crying over the puddle of goop), and himself. Well, there was Baku, but he was hiding on the roof and pretending he wasn't there. Ka'harja wasn't sure whether to call him down or not

—  
‘BAKU!’ Koko shouted, making the decision for him. ‘Get down here and help or I’ll boot you up the arse!’

‘*He’d p-probably enjoy that,*’ Coff muttered, rubbing his hands together anxiously.

Ka’harja had to hold back a laugh; he was right. Baku seemed to enjoy brawling with Koko more than anyone should enjoy a fight, but he’d always figured it was just how they bonded. Like he and his mother did when they armed themselves with logs and hit rocks at each other.... He hadn’t realised it was unusual by the rest of the caravan’s standards until someone had mentioned it.

‘Baku! Don’t make me climb up there and get you!’ Koko continued. ‘I’ll tug you down by your tail and hang you with the wet clothes if you don’t clean up!’

‘It’s slippery!’ Baku complained. ‘If I try and get down I’ll fall!’

‘What if I throw a cloth up for you?’ Koko suggested. And, though she rolled her eyes, her voice softened. ‘Then you can clean the top of the caravans! Needs to be done anyway.’

Baku looked reluctant, but slowly nodded. He wouldn’t dare disagree with Koko — Though, who would?

Ka’harja shifted from foot to foot as Felelor dragged Naranako back into the camp and Koko began shouting orders at them.

He didn’t know what to do.

Sure, he’d made the mess, but nobody else had done anything about the slime— Well, except Coborn and Lif. They’d actually *tried* to capture it. He should have left them to it, then he wouldn’t be here.... Where were they, anyway? He’d seen Trat helping Sken with Tucker, but he hadn’t seen where Lif went. And he was almost always by Trat’s side. And Coborn! She wasn’t the sort to run off like this; from what he’d seen of her she was more than happy to help clean up. Even the grossest things, like changing Little Demon. She always jumped at the chance to help with that.

Ka’harja sighed and shook his head. She was probably shaken and needed to sit down.

‘You alright there?’

Ka’harja jumped as Koko turned to him, and gave a short, anxious nod. ‘F-Fine. Sorry about the mess.’

‘Nah, at least you actually did something,’ Koko grinned, tipping her head sideways and flicking her ears playfully. ‘You were braver than the people we pay to be brave. How’s that for irony?’

He couldn’t help but laugh. It *was* ironic, especially considering he’d been terrified the entire time. He’d never been brave in his life. Honestly; the bravest thing he could ever recall doing was sneaking into the kitchen when he was fourteen and switching all the alcohol out for bottles filled with skunk’s blood. And he only remembered that because his mother had made him drink a cup when she’d found out what he’d done.

It hadn’t tasted as bad as he’d thought it would.

‘You’re right, I don’t think he’s with us anymore,’ Koko snickered, jabbing Ka’harja in the leg and bringing him out of his daydream. ‘There we go! Back on

Demrefor with us now? Or are you still in the clouds with your brain? Tall enough for it.'

Ka'harja gave his head a shake and glanced around the caravaners. 'Sorry, what were we talking about?'

'I was saying you can help Coff,' said Koko. 'And once you two are done you can have a break. You look like you need it.'

Nodding, Ka'harja rubbed his arm and followed Coff obediently. He wasn't ready to argue with Koko. The adrenaline had worn off and he just wanted to curl up and sleep. But instead, he and the healer made their way around the camp, poking at the puddles of slime that were splattered around until Coff found a pool of clean green liquid and started scooping it into a jar.

Unsure how to help, Ka'harja just watched as Coff filled the jar halfway before moving to another pile of goo.

The silence felt... awkward, so Ka'harja tried to make conversation. 'What's with you and Baku?'

'Ho— What do you m-mean?' stammered Coff. 'No-Nothing's with us?'

'He's always teasing you,' Ka'harja clarified. 'He seems to know how to push your buttons— And he seems to like doing it.'

'Oh, th-that,' Coff relaxed, though he blushed deeply as he spoke. 'Our pa-pa-pa — Our *parents* sent us to th-the same tutors to save money. He's a b-bit like a br-br-brother to me.'

'That explains all the inside jokes.'

'Y-Yeah,' Coff chuckled. 'He knows all o-of my s-secrets... and I, um, I know a-all of his. I tr-trust him with them, though. I mean, uh, he p-punched my ex-girl-girl-gir— My ex-girlfriend so hard he br-broke her j-jaw, so I know he'll stick up for me when I— When I need it.'

'Ouch, impressive,' Ka'harja bit his lip. He wondered why Coff's ex needed that sort of treatment, but figured it wasn't his business. Besides, if Baku hit her that hard she probably deserved it. Baku didn't even hit *Koko* that hard, and she seemed to like it.

'V-Very impr-impressive,' Coff managed. 'I mentioned it to Sk-Sken when she was hiring me —j-just an offhand comment— and, uh, that's why she thought he'd m-make a g-good guard. I didn't argue. Baku needed the j-job and... he's my best friend. It's b-been nice to have him around.'

'And he got to meet Koko,' Ka'harja joked. 'I'm sure he gives you credit for losing his virginity, too.'

Coff laughed loudly, then covered his mouth and blushed so red he looked like he couldn't breathe.

'Oh jeez, you alright?'

Coff nodded. 'F-Fine. I don't— I don't— I don't— I h-have idea wh-what that was.'

'It was a laugh,' replied Ka'harja. 'You never laughed like that before?'

'No— Not since I was a-a kid,' he admitted. Then he glanced around, twitching his ears anxiously and listening for something before leaning in close to Ka'harja and whispering, '*He's st-still a virgin.*'

Ka'harja nearly threw up, he laughed so hard.

'D-Don't tell him I t-told you!' Coff stammered. 'Pl-Please. He'd never forgive me— Well, uh, he probably w-would— Actually he p-probably wou-wouldn't care that you know. Koko— Koko would care. Don't tell K-Koko.'

Ka'harja nodded, biting his lip. 'What about you? Are *you* a virgin?'

Coff flushed bright red and looked away, not answering and instead asking, 'Are y-you?'

'Nope,' Ka'harja chuckled. 'I've fucked at least seven guys. Maybe eight? I can't remember. I had a notebook with their names but I... guess that's gone now.'

Coff nodded. 'I... sl-slept with my ex a few times. Wasn't ex-exactly... the nicest. She was, uh, a b-bit forceful.'

'Oh,' Ka'harja's heart dropped and he scratched his arm nervously. 'That sucks. I'm sorry to hear that.'

'I— Uh, it's f-fine,' Coff rubbed the back of his head before screwing the now-full jar of slime shut. 'Baku— He helped.'

It was awkward. Ka'harja hadn't expected the conversation to take this turn and he wasn't sure how to respond— Luckily he didn't have to. He heard Baku let out a shriek and turned to see Stars fling a second handful of slime at him, laughing as she did. Then Koko threw a bucket of water over Stars and immediately fell over as Felelor flung his wet cloth at her with such force that Ka'harja heard the *sthwupt* sound from where he knelt with Coff.

'I don't think I've ever seen Koko play around like that before,' Ka'harja joked, pushing himself to his feet. 'Let's get out of here before they throw shit at us, too.'

Coff nodded and the two boys made their way to the river to clean themselves off.

They passed Coborn and Lif as they went; Coborn looked like she'd been crying, and Ka'harja suddenly felt very sorry for her as Lif quietly led her back to the caravans. His arm was around her as he spoke to her, and his tone was softer and more even than it was when Trat was in earshot.

But Ka'harja didn't dwell on the thought. When he got to the water he leapt in, not bothering to take his already-soaked shorts off, and watched as Coff put his things down and slowly stripped. He... wasn't what Ka'harja expected him to look like. Ka'harja blinked; he couldn't take his eyes off Coff as he got undressed. He was almost disappointed when Coff didn't take off his underwear before climbing into the water. Then he caught himself thinking so and turned away.

Trying to clear his mind, Ka'harja dunked his head under the surface and shook it. He was *not* attracted to Coff.

Was he?

*NO!*

He shook his head again and resurfaced. He was fine. Absolutely fine and not attracted to someone he barely knew but seemed to have everything in common with

—

'A-Are you okay?' Coff asked, raising his brow. 'The water's not *th-that* cold, is it?'

*I wish it was*, thought Ka'harja. 'No, no, it's fine. I'm just— Uh, washing my

hair?’

For a moment, there was silence as Coff stared at Ka’harja in disbelief. ‘R... Okay? That was.... Yeah. Of course.’

‘So you have a *lot* of body hair!’ Ka’harja blurted. ‘How’d that happen? Puberty punch you in the face or what?’

‘Ac-Actually, my pa was wolv-wolven,’ said Coff. ‘I think I, uh, may— I may have mentioned it before? M-Maybe not.’

‘Oh— No. Yeah. I think I remember you saying something about that,’ Ka’harja felt himself blush. He was so *stupid!* ‘Yes. You definitely said something about it before. Sorry, I didn’t mean to be so forgetful.’

‘It’s fine,’ replied Coff, rubbing his fluffy chest roughly. ‘Uh, could you— Help? I can’t g-get this out on my own.’

A confused mix of emotions shot through Ka’harja. He wanted to help wash it off —oh Great Star did he ever want an excuse to touch Coff right now— but he also didn’t.... He didn’t want to let on to Coff that he was attracted to him. Not when he wasn’t sure *how* attracted to him he was. And especially now he knew about Coff’s ex-girlfriend.

*Why are all the cute ones straight?* Ka’harja held back his sigh and swum around Coff so he could rub his back; gentle up and down motions to loosen what was left of the slime.

‘Wh-What was your father l-like?’ Coff asked.

‘My father?’ for a moment, Ka’harja hesitated. ‘He... was Kay’oten’s brother. I think I may have said before that they were twins? Either way, he used to beat me a lot. Sometimes pick me up by my tail and throw me around.... Wasn’t a good guy.’

‘Oh— Oh,’ Coff rubbed his cheek and looked away. ‘So-Sorry I as-asked.’

‘It’s fine,’ sighed Ka’harja. ‘It’s barely a memory now.’

‘St-Still,’ Coff sighed. ‘That... doesn’t sound like a— Like a f-fun childhood.’

‘It wasn’t,’ Ka’harja admitted. ‘But, hey, meeting Mum made it worth it.’

Coff gave Ka’harja a weak smile and turned around. ‘Thanks f-for g-getting my back.’

‘No problem.’

‘I’ll do you, n-now?’

‘*What?*’ Ka’harja froze. ‘*Do me?*’

‘Your back?’ Coff clarified. ‘I-I’ll do your-your back. Wh-What did you think I m-meant?’

‘Nothing— I just don’t need help washing myself,’ he lied. ‘You can go now.’

‘Oh— Uh, okay,’ dejected, Coff swum to the riverbank and pulled himself out. ‘I’ll, uh, see you l-later?’

‘Yes, okay. Buh-bye!’ Ka’harja blurted in a ruder tone than he intended. He tried to wave goodbye as Coff made his way back to the caravans, but it just looked like he was mocking the healer.

After he lost sight of Coff, Ka’harja slapped himself in the face.

‘IDIOT!’

# Chapter 19

## Under a Blanket; A Storage Caravan Glif 28<sup>th</sup>, Year 10,053 AE

It had rained almost all night, so everyone had bunked down in the storage caravans instead of under the stars like they preferred to do.

Ka'harja could understand why they always slept outside, now; it was crowded in the overfilled wagon and he was lucky not to get a foot in the face whenever Lif rolled over. And someone had farted, which was not pleasant. He'd much prefer the crisp, outside air to this.

Plus, he couldn't concentrate with the boys' snoring next to him. He needed to clear his head after what had happened that morning; he couldn't stop thinking about Coff. He felt like an idiot. Coff had avoided him all day after his rude goodbye. And it had been such an awkward day that Ka'harja had decided it was better to bunk down with the other caravaners instead of sleeping next to his mother in Coff's caravan, where the healer would be....

Not that it mattered if Coff was straight, but— He still would have been a good friend. They'd gotten along so well... and Ka'harja had ruined it in one stupid moment.

One. Stupid. Moment.

And he'd lost his best chance at making a real, genuine connection with someone.

*It's fine, Ka'harja told himself. You've had a hard month. That's all. It's going to be alright— He probably won't even remember what happened in a day or two.*

'Coff?' Stars' voice rung out clearly in the quiet of the night, louder than the boys' snoring but not *too* loud. It was followed by a short, rapid knock on the caravan next to the one Ka'harja was in. 'Coff, are you awake?'

'We both are now!' Distro's voice responded playfully.

'Coff!' Stars exclaimed anxiously as Coff's door clicked open. 'I'm really worried. Ever since I had Little Demon I've been having trouble peeing— Koko said I should talk to you about it. And— She said I should wait until morning but I can't sleep because my head is being hakalika and making me have worried basaka, and I just want to know if it's mip or mup. I'm sorry. I don't mean to be dreankot.'

There was a loud grumble from Coff and a snort, like he was trying to wake

himself up.

‘I’m sorry,’ Stars repeated.

‘It’s fine,’ Coff said with a yawn. ‘Do you m-mean that you’re we-wetting yourself or that— Or that you’re struggling t-to go a-at all?’

Stars sighed. ‘I sneezed and had to change my clothes.’

‘That’s p-pretty normal after giv-giving birth,’ Coff said, relief in his voice. ‘But c-come inside and I-I’ll show you some exer-exercises to help strengthen y-your pelvic floor.’

Ka’harja sighed as Coff’s door closed and he flopped back down. He hadn’t even realised he’d sat up to listen. His head hit hard against his pillow and he groaned.

He missed *his* bed. And he missed his house. And he missed shoving his mother out of bed in the morning— And he missed sticking his head in the empty porridge pot while she banged against it with a spoon to see how long he could handle the noise before having to lay down. And he missed moving the table just ever-so-slightly further away from the wall so that when she would lean back she’d fall over.

He missed being home.

He didn’t mean to sniff, but his chest was tight and he felt sick. He heard Trat roll over and held his breath, trying to keep as quiet as possible, but he saw a shadow sit up and knew he had been heard.

‘Mate, you alright?’ Trat asked. ‘You’re not crying... are you?’

Ka’harja shook his head, scared that if he spoke he’d say the wrong thing— It didn’t matter, though, because he had to breathe, and the moment he did a loud, ugly sob escaped him and the rest of his body decided to give in to his head.

‘Aw, man, nah!’ Trat exclaimed, tripping over Lif in his attempt to crawl next to Ka’harja. ‘It’s alright. Hey, hey. Relax man. It’s okay! It’s okay. Hey....’

Lif snorted awake and looked around. He pushed himself up when he heard Ka’harja and shuffled over. ‘Fuck, you alright?’

‘What’s wrong?’ Trat asked, putting an arm on Ka’harja’s back. ‘Why are you crying?’

‘I’m not— Crying!’ Ka’harja snapped, crying into his pillow. ‘I’m fine! It’s okay— Nothing’th wrong!’

The words barely came out. His chest tightened and his eyes were streaming tears down his face and his tongue felt too big for his mouth again. He bit it, trying to stop his lip from coming back. Always when he was upset. It always came back. Just like every other bad memory always came back.

The two boys looked at each other for a moment, then shuffled to the other side of the caravan and sat, whispering amongst themselves.

Ka’harja tried to stop himself from sobbing, but he couldn’t get his body to behave. His tears soaked into his pillow and he cursed at himself for being such an embarrassing wreck.

‘Hey,’ Trat’s voice was closer than before, and Ka’harja looked up, flinching when he found the man was next to him again. ‘I know that they say drinking doesn’t help, but... well, it always helped me.’

A long moment passed before Ka’harja realised that the boys were holding a bottle of Melberry out to him. He took it gratefully, though he didn’t say anything in

fear it would come out as an incoherent mess, and took a long drink.

‘Lif, open the door,’ Trat said gently. ‘Some air’ll do us all some good.’

‘No, it’th fine,’ Ka’harja managed, biting his tongue to stop his lisp. ‘I... I think I’ll go out for a walk.’

Lif nodded, and held the fabric sheet to the side so Ka’harja could pass easily. ‘If you need to talk....’

‘I know,’ Ka’harja muttered, sliding out of the caravan and nodding to the boys. ‘Not now. Thank.... Thank you.’

‘Hey,’ Trat muttered, sticking his head out of the caravan. ‘Ka, man? It’ll be alright. I know it doesn’t feel like it... but it *does* get better. Trust me.’

Ka’harja gave a curt nod and bit his lip. He wasn’t sure how true that was, but instead of arguing he just turned away and made his way around the dark caravan.

He wasn’t sure how long he walked for. Whether it was five minutes or five hours— He couldn’t tell. He couldn’t think straight, and so he just let his legs carry him wherever they thought was best.... He headed to the river, which he followed downstream for a while before turning around and slowly trudging back to the caravans. He passed them and went upriver a little further; only stopping when he saw a pair of silhouettes in the distance. The shadows were covered in faint glowing dots that blurred into a beautiful swirl as one picked up the other and spun them through the air.

A weak smile found the corners of Ka’harja’s mouth as Annanyn let out a happy squeal and the couple disappeared into the river.

At least some things in the world were still good. There was still love. And family.

And his mother.

Ka’harja turned on his heels and headed back to the caravan.

He hoped his mother was still awake. Maybe he could talk to her? He wasn’t sure what about, but he knew she could help. Just being in the same room as her usually made things feel better. And even if she was asleep, maybe Coff would let him sit on the floor for a while and drink. Or cry.

Or both.

It wasn’t long before Ka’harja managed to find his way to Coff’s caravan. He knocked lightly on the door and waited patiently. After a few moments he took in a deep breath.... He wasn’t sure he’d knocked loud enough. But he also didn’t want to wake anyone if they were still asleep. Should he knock again?

He flicked his tail anxiously and pricked up his ears to listen. He could *definitely* hear voices inside the caravan. But that might just be his mother sleep talking... no! It was two people, at least.

He let out his breath and knocked again. Harder this time.

Within moments Coff was at the door and Ka’harja felt himself blush with embarrassment as he remembered their conversation earlier that day. For a moment he and Coff just stared at each other. Then Coff motioned for him to come in.

He hesitated again, but then Coff repeated his welcoming motion and mumbled something and Ka’harja quickly pulled himself up the steps into the healer’s home.

Sitting on Coff’s bed was Stars. She grinned widely as Distro lay on the other

bed, pulling faces.

‘I didn’t have a weak bladder when *Ka’harja* was born!’

*Ka’harja* caught the end of their conversation and laughed loudly.

His mother jumped, then grinned when she realised who it was. ‘Oh, *Ka!* We were just talking about you!’

‘So I heard,’ *Ka’harja* snickered.

‘I don’t think Stars understood the joke,’ chuckled Distro, turning back to the girl. ‘He’s adopted, hon. I didn’t give birth to him.’

For a long while Stars just stared at Distro, her expression confused and curious as her ears twitched and her brow furrowed. Then her grin returned and she clapped her hands. ‘OH! I get it! I get it! Mip mip, Kekik Distro!’

‘Your mother’s s-something,’ Coff shook his head and laughed as he picked up some books from his desk and began to reshelve them. ‘She’s got s-some gr-great jokes. She’s been good company. I’m almost s-sorry that she’s getting better— I mean— B-Because she won’t be keeping me company any-anymore, n-not because I want her to be s-sick!’

‘No, no, I know,’ *Ka’harja* reassured the healer as he dropped the books in his panic. He bent down to help Coff collect them and they bumped heads. ‘*Fuck!* Sorry.’

‘It wa-was m-m-my f-fault,’ Coff muttered, collecting his books into a pile and sliding them next to the bookshelf. ‘I-I’ll just do it later. It’s not a pr-problem....’

There was a moment of quiet as the two shuffled awkwardly in place.

‘So, you get along with my mum?’ *Ka’harja* asked, forcing himself to grin. ‘I’m glad about that. She’s not always the most agreeable person. She kicks in her sleep, and there’s never enough butter in the mashed potato.’

Coff laughed. ‘Oh, y-yeah, she’s been pretty critical of Coborn’s c-cooking, actually.’

‘She adds too much salt!’ Distro exclaimed defensively. ‘If she would just ease up with the seasoning her food would be great! But apparently a “drop of citrus” means “chuck a whole grapefruit in and hope for the best” in her mind!’

*Ka’harja* rolled his eyes. ‘She doesn’t add enough flavour, if you ask me—’

‘I think she cooks really well,’ Stars interrupted loudly. ‘She’s cooking for a lot of people, and all of them like different things. It’s really hard for her to get it right and I don’t think you should make fun of her when she’s just doing what Sken tells her to do. That’s bwab.’

A surge of guilt made *Ka’harja*’s face fall, and he wrung his hands. ‘You’re right. Sorry.’

‘I’m not the one you need to be sorry to. You’re not making fun of *me* behind *my* back,’ replied Stars. Then she frowned and wiggled uncomfortably. ‘Coff, how long do I have to do these for? Can I stop now?’

‘J-Just a few every d-day until your pelvic floor strengthens,’ Coff told her, and *Ka’harja* remembered why she’d been to see the healer. ‘Just do what— Do whatever you feel like you can h-handle.’

‘My back hurts, too,’ Stars sighed. ‘And my legs.’

‘That’s not un-unusual e-either, but l-let me see,’ Coff muttered, walking around Stars so examine her back. He moved to touch her too fast and she jumped off

the bed with a fearful cry— Which scared Coff, causing him to slip and fall on the floor.

‘I thought— I thought you were going to hit me!’ Stars exclaimed, dropping to her knees and helping Coff off the ground. ‘I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to get scared and shout! I’m really *really* sorry!’

‘It— It’s okay,’ struggling to his feet, Coff flicked his tail against Stars and folded back his ears. ‘It w-was my f-fault entirely. I sh-should have let you know what I was — Wh-Wh-What I was d-d-doing.’

Stars shook her head, and took a deep breath. ‘You’re looking after me. I should know that you’re not going to miita me.’

‘It’s not always that easy,’ Distro remarked. ‘It’s been nine years and Ka still flinches when people raise their voice. Shit happens, you don’t have to feel bad about it.’

Stars stared at Distro before slowly nodding and sitting back on the bed. ‘I’m still sorry.’

‘I know,’ Coff muttered, sitting behind her and examining her back carefully. ‘L-Let’s talk about something to get our minds off it, al-alright?’

‘Okay. What about?’

‘Well, C-Coborn said you didn’t eat your second lunch yesterday,’ he commented. ‘Wh-Why didn’t you get y-your food?’

Ka’harja felt a twinge of jealousy at that; he’d *love* to have eight meals a day like Stars and Dena... even if it was just a cup of weird soup with vegetables and calcium powder.

*Idiot!* He thought as he shook his head. *They’re sick. They need it.*

‘I can get my own food,’ Stars said simply. ‘I’m a kekik, not a berr, and not to be bahi but I am getting very mip at looking after myself. I caught a bird yesterday instead of getting something from Coborn.’

‘You shouldn’t eat...’ trailing off, Coff sighed again and pressed his hands against Stars’ lower back, trying to ease out the tension in her muscles. ‘Co-Coborn’s cooking you sp-special food, remember? With lots of nutrients t-to help you gain weight and— And make milk? Even if you get other f-food I still want you eating what sh-she makes you.’

‘Okay, I’ll eat it. But it doesn’t taste as good as her normal food—’ Stars cut off with a yelp. ‘*Miita!* Mup miita! That hurt!’

‘S-Sorry, I... I’m no good at-at th-this,’ Coff admitted, backing away from Stars and raising his hands submissively. ‘But I-I’m really n-needing to get the— The— The tension out of your b-back.’

‘Let Ka’harja do it!’ Distro’s suggestion was so loud and sudden it made everyone jump. ‘He gives me massages all the time. He knows what he’s doing.’

Coff glanced to Ka’harja, who felt a shiver go up his spine.

‘Sure,’ Ka’harja agreed. ‘I’ll do it.’

‘Thanks,’ Coff muttered as Ka’harja slipped into place behind Stars. ‘I appreciate the help.’

‘Lie down on your stomach and relax,’ Ka’harja told Stars. ‘It’ll hurt a bit at first, so try not to tense up again, okay?’

Stars nodded before lying down obediently.

Ka'harja pulled her shirt up to her shoulders, then spoke gently; 'I'm going to have to pull your pants down a bit so they don't get in the way. Are you alright with that?'

Shuffling nervously, Stars glanced awkwardly up at her friend. 'Okay, but don't try to have sex with me. I don't want mup'kata.'

'Hey, I'm gay, remember?' Ka'harja pet Stars' calf before giving her pants a gentle tug. 'Guys only.'

'You— You're gay?' Coff asked, his voice laced with shock and... was that excitement?

*No, just wishful thinking, Ka'harja thought with a sigh. He's already said he had a girlfriend before.*

'That's right!' Stars exclaimed, the anxiety in her voice completely gone. 'He's gay! He doesn't like girls at all! I'd forgotten that!'

'What— What k-kind of guys are you i-into?' Coff asked.

Ka'harja opened his mouth to respond, but was cut off by Stars.

'He likes small men!' she told him. Then she gasped excitedly. 'You're small, aren't you Coff? Ka'harja! Is Coff the sort of man you like? Do you want to have sex with Coff?'

Ka'harja just laughed and didn't dare look to see Coff's expression as he ignored the question completely and began massaging Stars. 'Does that hurt?'

He'd hope it was a no, but Stars let out a squeak and so he relaxed his grip. He'd found the source of the tension, at least. Now he just had to ease it out without hurting her.

'Five minutes and you'll forget you were ever sore,' Ka'harja promised. 'Let's pass the time with jokes?'

'Yi, I have one,' Stars muttered, obviously trying to hold back a pained whimper. 'What goes thump, screech, crash?'

'I don't know,' Ka'harja saw Coff out of the corner of his eye and felt guilty as the man sorted anxiously through his books. He waited for Stars' answer for a while, and when she didn't give it he cleared his throat. 'Stars?'

*'I forgot the answer,' she whispered.*

Distro laughed loudly, snorting as she did. 'A rock thrown at a harpy!'

Ka'harja felt Stars shift underneath him. 'That's it! *That's* the answer! Mip mip, Kekik Distro!'

He didn't think it was very funny, himself, but he chuckled as Stars and Distro began to share more jokes together. He was glad his mother knew how to distract Stars; he felt her relax and was finally able to work out her muscle tension.

'Okay, I have one,' he grinned. 'If two heirs are fighting to the death for the Heck'ne throne, is it called Gra'ga-*who da mala'kala*?'

For a moment the room was silent. Then Stars began to tremble underneath Ka'harja. Slowly, her giggles rose out of her until she laughed so hard tears streamed down her cheeks and she went red in her struggle to breathe.

'Who da mala'kala!' she panted, burying her face into Coff's pillow and snorting loudly. 'Gra— Gra— Ga— Who—'

'You've fucking killed her,' joked Distro.

‘When you’re done I’ll tell you a knock-knock joke,’ Ka’harja said, patting Stars on the shoulder.

Stars took a deep breath in through her nose and managed to bring her laughter down to a muffled giggle. ‘What’s a knock-knock joke? How do they work?’

‘Well, first I’ll say, “knock-knock” and then you ask me, “who’s there?”’ Ka’harja explained. ‘Did you get that?’

‘Yep!’ Stars wiggled happily under Ka’harja and he had to pin her down to stop her flinging him off her back. Her ears twitched excitedly as she asked him what happened next.

‘Then you repeat what I say, but add “who” at the end, you got that?’ Ka’harja told her, carefully sliding off her back to sit beside her. He felt his tail give a wag and shifted so it was under his leg; he didn’t want to embarrass himself with such a childish expression. Not in front of Coff.

‘I think I understand!’ Stars giggled, rolling over. ‘Then you give me the answer, and we laugh?’

‘About right,’ Ka’harja gave a cough to clear his throat. ‘You think you’re ready for the joke?’

Stars nodded happily. ‘Yes! Please tell me the joke!’

‘Okay, well.... Knock-knock—’

‘Come in!’ Stars blurted. ‘Oh— Na, wait— I ruined it, didn’t I?’

Ka’harja was too busy laughing to answer.

‘Don’t laugh at me!’ Stars snapped, sitting straight up and pressing down her ears. ‘I’m not a joke! Stop it! Stop laughing! Broja’kar!’

‘You’re right, I’m sorry,’ taking a deep breath to calm himself down, Ka’harja put a hand on Stars’ knee. ‘You’re not a joke. You’re my friend. And you made a mistake which was really funny and cute and completely okay to make— But I shouldn’t have laughed about it.’

‘It makes me feel bad,’ Stars muttered, looking away. ‘My mistakes aren’t funny.’

‘I’m sorry,’ repeated Ka’harja, guilt turning his tone serious. ‘I’m not trying to make you feel bad.’

Stars just sighed and let the room fall quiet. The only sound was Coff’s anxious shuffling.

After a moment, Coff looked up from his books. ‘Stars? H-How’s your back feeling?’

‘Much better,’ Stars smiled, her ears flicking up happily. ‘Thank you, Ka’harja. I really appreciate it a whole lot. Sorry that I ruined it.’

‘Hey, no. I’m glad you told me I hurt your feelings. Means I can avoid doing it again,’ Ka’harja told her as she leapt off the bed and sprinted to the caravan’s door. He flinched when she ran straight into it with a loud *bang*, and he swore he could feel the force of her collision shake the bed. ‘You alright?’

She stumbled in place, rubbing her face with all four of her hands. ‘I think so.’

‘Try turning the handle,’ Distro suggested flatly.

‘I did try, but I went too fast,’ explained Stars, her cheeks flushing red (with a blush or a forming bruise, Ka’harja wasn’t sure). ‘Goodnight Distro. Goodnight

Ka'harja. Goodnight Coff.'

'Night!' Distro called after Stars as she slipped quietly out the door.

After Stars had left, the room quieted down. Coff went back to sorting his shelves and Ka'harja sat down next to his mother, who fiddled with anything and everything she could reach from her spot on the bed— Including the falcon statue they'd gotten from the goblins a few weeks before.

'This is really well made,' Distro commented, running her hands along the smooth surface. 'It's almost hard to believe they carved it themselves. I would have guessed they'd just frozen an actual falcon— Except the for the face. I don't think there's a bird alive that looks like this.'

'Well, they *were* goblins,' Ka'harja joked as his mother passed him the statue and reached for the pile of books Coff had dropped. 'Pretty good considering the only birds they'd have gotten close to would have been dead.'

Distro laughed and pulled a diary-sized book from the pile. She played with its lock absent-mindedly. 'I like to call her Winona, after that famous human that trained those birds to carry messages. She's been keeping me company whenever Coff goes out.'

'She t-talks to that thing all n-night,' Coff muttered, holding out a hand. It took Ka'harja a moment to realise he wanted the statue. 'I-I've thought about th-throwing it out or smashing it. B-But it just feels wrong to do— I-I t-traded my ponytail for it, so...'

'She makes a good night-light,' Distro commented, still playing with the book's lock. 'I honestly love her. If you don't want her I'll take her. She'll be like a weird friend who I can tell all my secrets to.'

Coff chuckled and turned around to talk to Distro, but the moment he saw the book she was holding he let out a choked gasp and lunged at her. 'NO! D-Don't o-open with that! That's my pr-private— No! Nobody's allowed to r-read that!'

'What, did you write it?' Distro joked. 'Or is it an erotic novel with a super-embarrassing kink?'

Coff's expression as he hugged the book made it clear that it was both, and Distro laughed so hard she fell out of bed.

Ka'harja found it hard not to chuckle at first, too, but when Coff turned he saw the hurt in his eyes and forced himself to stop, wiping his nose with the back of his hand and sniffing. 'What's the kink?'

Coff fumbled with the words as much as he fumbled putting the book away. After an agonising minute he turned back to Ka'harja and shook his head. 'It's— Nothing. D-Don't w-worry about it.'

'Come on, Stars told you mine!' Ka'harja said playfully. 'And whatever it is, it can't be as embarrassing as Baku's love of getting beaten up.'

'Well, uh, when you p-put it l-like that...' a humoured smile turned the corners of Coff's mouth, and he blushed. 'I l-like... t-tall people. R-Really t-tall people. Woven-tall people.'

'Opposite for me,' Ka'harja laughed. 'I love short guys. I mean, what's the point of having a boyfriend if you can't pick him up?'

'So Stars said,' Coff's blush grew, and he wouldn't meet Ka'harja's eye. 'Short

guys.... Short guys like me. Me... a short guy... who likes tall people. And you're a tall guy. Who likes short guys.... Short guys like me....'

There was a tense moment between the two. Ka'harja wondered if... maybe Coff was implying.... No, he *couldn't* be!

He'd had a girlfriend before.

He *absolutely* wasn't implying that!

Ka'harja pushed the thought to the back of his mind and shrugged at Coff. 'Yeah.'

'Y-Yeah....'

'Yeah.'

And that seemed to be the end of the conversation, as neither Coff nor Ka'harja continued it.

Instead they just stood there. Looking at each other and not saying anything.

*Nope....*

Not saying anything—

'KA'HARJA!' Distro's loud shout cut through the tense quiet and both boys let out their own loud cries of surprise.

Ka'harja covered his ears and Coff slipped over in his shock, landing on the floor with a crash and knocking down another pile of yet-to-be-sorted things.

'Great Star, Mum!' Ka'harja gasped, pulling his hands away from his ears and trying to make his tail fur lie down again. 'What was that for?'

'I want a drink,' she replied, simply. 'Tell the kinky doctor I'm well enough to drink again.'

'I think that's up to him to decide,' Ka'harja sighed, helping the healer to his feet. 'Coff?'

'NO!' Coff snapped. 'Not until y-you're completely better!'

'Fine,' Distro grumbled and rolled over in bed. 'Get me a book, then.'

Ka'harja gave her the first one he grabbed:

*A Complete Guide to Chino Flowers and their Medicinal Benefits: By Colour.*

Rolling her eyes, Distro opened it and settled down, leaving Ka'harja and Coff standing awkwardly together.

Ka'harja's thoughts jumped around in his head as he tried to recall what they'd been talking about before. But he couldn't remember; instead all he could think of was how cute Coff was.

*I bet I could pick you up,* he thought to himself. *You're so small I could throw you like a ball. You're only up to my hip. You'd barely even need to kneel to—* Ka'harja forced himself to stop thinking before he'd completed the thought and turned away.

'Uh, so...' Coff swallowed, and rubbed his arm anxiously. 'Is the s-scar on your nose from the same in-injury that bent the bridge?'

Ka'harja gave a start and turned back. 'What? Oh, no. The scar is from a scratch I got while trying to break a branch in half as a kid, and the crooked bridge has... always been like that, I think. I mean, I got punched in the face a few times by my father but he never broke it or anything. At least, I don't think so? I probably wouldn't have known either way.'

‘Oh, s-sorry. I didn’t mean t-to—’

‘It’s fine,’ Ka’harja gave a weak grin and shrugged. ‘I’m going to head back to bed.’

Distro flung the book at her son. ‘Don’t you dare leave me here alone!’

‘That bed’s way too small to share! I nearly crushed you last time I slept in it!’ Ka’harja groaned. ‘What am I meant to do? Sleep in Coff’s bed?’

‘You can if you w-want, it w-wouldn’t bother me,’ said Coff. Then he blushed and began to stutter as he realised what he’d said. ‘I-I mean because I’m not sleeping tonight! I have too much s-study to do! M-My bed’s going to be empty anyway and I – I mean, y-you’re free to u-use it.’

*Dammit*, Ka’harja just wanted to get out of the healer’s room and get away from the awkward situation, but there was no way he could get out now without looking like an arse. So instead of arguing he just climbed into Coff’s bed and watched as the healer settled at his desk nearby.

Ka’harja had two choices: roll over and stare at the wall, or continue looking at Coff’s hips, which were only about a meter away from his face. Ka’harja’s exhaustion was finally catching up to him, however, so he didn’t bother moving and stared with half-open, tired eyes as Coff began to study.

‘Goodnight, Sweetheart,’ Distro joked. ‘You have your big boy bed at last. No more sleeping next to mummy.’

Ka’harja snickered, and let out a yawn. ‘Shut up, Mum.’

Distro’s laughter soon turned into a snore, and Ka’harja felt himself begin to drift off as well. He was almost asleep when Coff let out a loud sigh and turned in his seat, leaning over Ka’harja to grab something off the head of the bed. He got distracted and froze, turning the pages of a book and muttering quietly to himself

Ka’harja had to bite his lip to keep himself from grinning, and jokingly thanked the non-existent gods for the fact that Coff’s chair was the same height as his bed.

Then he remembered what he’d seen of Coff the day before and rolled over, trying not to imagine what the rest looked like.

‘Sorry,’ Coff mumbled, grabbing the book and quickly stepping back to his desk. ‘I— Th-Thought you were asleep.’

*I nearly was, until you shoved your dick in my face*, Ka’harja thought, giving a grunt to acknowledge Coff. *Not that I’m complaining about that....*

Soon, Ka’harja felt himself drifting off again. The gentle turning of pages and quiet clanking of glass and metal was soothing; it reminded him of when he was young and went to bed in the early evenings, falling asleep to the sounds of his mother’s potion making.

‘That’s n-not right. D-Dammit!’ Coff swore, and then a smell somewhere between a rat’s fart and stagnant water wafted into the air.

Ka’harja closed his eyes and imagined his first attempt at cooking. Distro had interrupted him halfway through and snapped at him for sneaking into the kitchen when she’d told him not to. Ka’harja had argued with her, and she’d decided to let him finish... provided he ate the soup he made. No matter how bad it tasted.

This smelt like his soup had tasted.

# Chapter 20

## A Wedding Venue; An Unfamiliar City? Glif 29<sup>th</sup>, Year 10,053 AE

It was his wedding day? How did that happen?

*Never-mind! Who cared!* Ka'harja couldn't believe the day had finally come! He was so excited to be getting married to the love of his life!

He smiled, pulling the carefully painted wedding-egg out of his tail fur, and cracked it with the side of his spoon.

'Hello, my love,' he greeted as he pulled apart the shell and carefully tipped the tiny man on top of the wedding cake. 'Today's the day.'

Coff sat down, putting his hands in his lap as he shook his head. 'Wrong. Tomorrow.'

'Tomorrow?' Ka'harja echoed. 'But tomorrow never comes.'

'Exactly,' Coff said calmly as he slowly sunk into the cake's thick icing. 'Goodbye.'

Ka'harja snorted awake with a start and groaned, rubbing his eyes and rolling over in bed. *What the fuck.*

'Morning, sleepyhead!' Distro called cheerily. 'You slept in longer than I did. It's a miracle! I say we have a party with lots of alcohol that I'm *absolutely* allowed to drink because Coff told me it was fine last night while you were asleep.'

'As long as there's no cake,' Ka'harja groaned, pushing himself up and yawning. He moved Coff's tail off his own as he sat up and glanced at the sleeping healer. 'I've had enough cake.'

'What?' Distro asked with a chuckle. 'Sweetheart? Are you alright?'

'Oh, nothing, just a dream,' Ka'harja stretched and felt his spine *click* into place. 'Did you dream last night?'

'Yeah, about my mum— First one, not my stepmother,' Distro told him. 'Why, did you dream it too?'

He shook his head. 'No. I had a different dream.'

'That's weird,' Distro chuckled. 'Maybe this dragon thing's messed up more than just my face.'

'No, I think it was me,' Ka'harja laughed. 'I had a dream about Coff.'

‘Ooh, someone has a *crush!*’ Distro snickered. ‘Don’t say it too loud though, you might wake him.’

Ka’harja glanced to his side and looked to Coff, asleep at his workbench; his face pressed against a scroll and his hand gripping a pen. Ingredients were scattered in an unorganised mess across the table and floor, and a heavy looking book lay open at his feet. Curious, Ka’harja glanced at the page and saw the smallest text he’d ever seen, and lots of math. He opted to ignore its existence and slid out of bed, wiped his face on his arm, and stared at the exhausted healer. He felt bad for Coff; he’d worked himself to the point of exhaustion and didn’t look very comfortable.

‘Do you think he’s alright?’ Ka’harja sniffed, stifling his yawn.

‘You know he always sleeps like that,’ Distro shrugged. ‘He might as well only have one bed in here; it’s not like he ever uses his.’

Ka’harja sighed and scooped the smaller man up into his arms. He was surprisingly light —almost as light as Distro— and Ka’harja had no problem tucking him into the still-warm bed. The healer groaned when Ka’harja pulled the blanket over him and buried his face into his pillow. ‘*Tomorrow.... I’ll tell him....*’

‘He’s dreaming about something good,’ chuckled Ka’harja, dropping Coff’s pen back onto the table and heading for the door. ‘I’ll bring you back some breakfast once I’ve eaten.’

‘You better!’ Distro teased. ‘Or I’ll chop you up and eat *you!*’

‘You’ll have to catch me first, little legs!’ Ka’harja replied as he slipped out of the room. He shook his head as his mother began shouting responses through the door and couldn’t help grinning. He loved his mother, warts and all— No, *scales* and all!

‘You’re in a good mood, friend!’ Baku asked as he passed. ‘What’s got you laughing like that?’

Ka’harja nodded to the caravan door and watched as Baku listened carefully.

‘*I’ll start with the brain!*’ Distro exclaimed. ‘*Boil it and turn it into stock to flavour the rest of you! Then I’ll roast your arms and mince your legs and—*’

‘By the Goddess,’ chuckled Baku. ‘Is she yelling at you or Coff?’

‘Oh, just me,’ Ka’harja replied. ‘If she was yelling at Coff it would be more along the lines of “if you don’t give me a drink I’ll drink your blood instead!” You know, fun stuff.’

‘Sounds like a party,’ Baku said with a grin. ‘Well, I just got off night shift with Koko, so I’m going to go get some sleep.’

‘I’ll leave you to it,’ Ka’harja gave a nod to dismiss Baku, who waved happily and headed into the caravan Ka’harja had tried to sleep in the night before. *And thank you for letting me know how bad a mood Koko’s going to be in today.*

With that thought, Ka’harja turned on his heels and headed toward the burnt-out fire where Coborn was gathering the dirty dishes. He glanced around at everyone to get his bearings.

He saw Stars and Dena by the fire together, feeding Little Demon, and sitting only a little bit away from them, Felelor was trying to eat. He was having trouble because Naranako was clinging to his arm chattering like a child as Trat and Lif encouraged him. The two men were giving impish glances to Felelor, whose own look was like an omen of death to come.

Ka'harja tried to remember how Felelor and Naranako were related... Brothers? Cousins? Oh— *Right!* Felelor had said something about his sister being Naranako's mother.

Or was it the other way around and Naranako's sister was Felelor's mother?

'Naranako I'm going to slap you so hard you'll end up even taller!' Felelor growled as Naranako gave him an excited shake and he spilt his soup. 'I swear to the Goddess, Naranako! Spill my soup one more time! I dare you! I'll make you regret being born!'

No, he was right the first time. Felelor was *definitely* the uncle.

Distracted by the boys, Ka'harja nearly tripped on Koko. He saw her at the last minute and froze at her side; his foot dangerously close to her tail as she slept on the damp ground, wrapped up in her sleeping bag with Tucker flopped over her legs.

*She must be exhausted,* Ka'harja thought to himself, stepping over her and Tucker.

The incarrah gave a heavy sigh, squealing through his gills and licking his slimy lips as Ka'harja passed.

'Yeah, me too boy,' Ka'harja mumbled to the fish-dog before heading towards Coborn. He wasn't sure what to say, but remembered his conversation with Stars the night before and so gave her the brightest smile he could manage. 'Morning, Coborn! Smells really nice today!'

He wasn't lying, either. It smelt *amazing*. Maybe he was just hungry, but something about her cooking seemed more appealing than it ever had before.

'Thanks,' half-smiling, and pushing her hair out of her eyes, Coborn glanced to Coff's caravan and bit her lip. 'You... spent the night with Coff?'

Ka'harja shrugged, trying not to blush at the thought of the healer. 'It was more that I spent the night with my mum.'

'Oh...' she sounded almost disappointed. 'You know I used to share a room with him? Before he got me a job with Sken, that is.'

'Did you two... date?' Ka'harja didn't mean to sound so shocked, but he couldn't imagine either of them getting up the courage to make the first move and get into a relationship.... Was Coborn the ex Baku had punched in the face? *But why would Baku ever hit Coborn?*

'No! Oh, *Goddess* no!' a look of disgust passed over Coborn's face, as if Ka'harja had implied she'd dated a family member; then she realised the tone she'd used and blushed deeply, anxiously starting to work her hand over her collarbone the way Ka'harja had seen her do many times before. He still never got a good look at her tattoo. 'I met his ex, though. She was... uh.... Well if you need to know what she was like, she threw a vase at me once.'

'Great Star, really?' Ka'harja gasped.

'Knocked me out,' Coborn said, putting her hand on the side of her head as if remembering the collision. 'But— Uh, that's not the point. We were talking about how I used to live with Coff?'

Ka'harja got the hint, and let her change the topic. 'How'd that happen?'

'I was dismissed from my apprenticeship in the La'Can royal kitchens. A lot of people lost their jobs, including Coff's mother. She'd been training me and, well, I

couldn't afford to move back to Tyali so she let me stay with her. I spent a while on their couch before Coff let me use his bed —you know how he always falls asleep at his desk— and I stayed with the family for a few... uh....'

'A few weeks?' Ka'harja offered.

'Years,' Coborn corrected, her cheeks darkening in a blush. 'About two years.'

'How... old were you?' Ka'harja asked.

'Twelve when I moved in,' Coborn looked away, and rubbed her collar even more vigorously. 'Fourteen when I started working for Sken.'

'Wow,' Ka'harja breathed. 'That's pretty young.'

'Yeah,' Coborn gave a weak smile and scooped a bowl of soup for Ka'harja. 'I think I've done most of my learning here with her. Seces dishes are... interesting, to say the least. Nothing like wolver food, that's for sure. And certainly not like anything foxen! You can't deep fry salmon eggs. At least not easily.'

Ka'harja felt himself laugh as he took the chunky vegetable mix from Coborn and gave it a quick stir. 'Thanks for this.'

Coborn gave him a thankful smile. 'No— Thanks for talking with me. I get so busy, sometimes I forget to be social. Sorry it was a bit awkward.'

'I know the feeling,' he chuckled, giving her a nod. 'See you later.'

Ka'harja was glad he'd had the conversation. He hadn't even realised he'd been stressed until after he'd relaxed. Now he could just sit and eat.

Though... there wasn't much space to sit; most of the ground was too damp, and the few spots that weren't too wet were already taken.

Ka'harja glanced around dumbly before catching sight of Sken, who gave him a wave and patted the log she sat on. Not wanting to be rude Ka'harja walked over and sat with her.

'Morning,' Sken gave Ka'harja a friendly slap on the back, nearly making him spill his food. 'You're up pretty late in the day— And listening to your mother, she's gotten up early! For her, at least. It's still pretty late for a normal person to be getting up.'

'True,' Ka'harja chuckled, his voice quieter than he meant it to be.

Sken paused for a moment and looked at him expectantly, as if she realised he had something to say.

He hadn't meant to sound that way, but it was true. He wanted to talk to someone about his feelings for Coff. Someone who wasn't a childhood friend of his— Who wouldn't tell Coff about it... He hadn't intended to talk to Sken, but... she'd understand. Maybe....

'Well, uh—'

Before he could get the words out of his mouth, Annanyn plopped herself between the pair and offered them both fish from her complicated-looking platter. As she turned to Ka'harja her face pulled in a grimace. 'What's that smell?'

'What smell?' Sken asked.

'Smells like mouldy cloth,' Annanyn muttered, sniffing at the air. 'I think someone's cast magic here recently.'

'What?' Ka'harja laughed. 'What are you talking about?'

Annanyn was too busy sniffing to respond, so Sken answered for her. 'She's an

aura sensor. She can smell magic.'

'Smell magic?' Ka'harja echoed. 'I though aura sensors... sensed magic.'

'Smell is a sense,' Sken scoffed, rolling her eyes and grinning playfully. 'Every aura sensor is different. Annanyn smells it.... What sort of magic is it, puddle-hopper?'

Annanyn shrugged. 'I think it's some sort of dream magic, but it's too weak to tell. Probably just wafted over from somewhere else.'

'You sure?' Sken asked.

Annanyn nodded, and began to scoff food from her platter. 'Oh Goddess, Coborn's so good at cooking!'

Ka'harja didn't agree; she was mediocre at best.... But then, he wasn't the one who hired her. Sken had hired her— And even though Sken obviously wasn't a fan of her food, it was clear to see why. Just looking at Annanyn's satisfied face every mealtime almost made his own heart melt. And he was gay. Very *very* gay.

Great Star, Coff was beautiful.

'Ka'harja?' Sken's voice wafted gently over her wife's head. 'You had something to say?'

'Oh, no, it's fine,' giving an anxious chuckle, Ka'harja shrugged. 'It's nothing.'

'If you're sure...' slowly, Sken trailed off. She put an arm around Annanyn and the three sat in silence for a moment before Annanyn grabbed a slice of banana off her plate and stuck it on her forehead.

'I'm Banananyn,' she stated. 'Banananyn Bunana.'

Ka'harja stared as Sken let out her usual ear-piercing laugh and wiped her nose.

'My last name used to be Bunan,' Annanyn told Ka'harja as she peeled the banana off her face. 'But I liked the name Lyzik better, so I had to marry Sken to get it.'

'Right,' Ka'harja laughed as the girls shared a slimy, giggle-filled kiss that lasted just a second too long to be considered socially acceptable.

Annanyn's freckles lit up so brightly they blurred into large spots, and she pulled away from her wife with a giggle.

'*Bunanany*,' she whispered.

Sken's gills let out another *scree* as she buried her face into Annanyn's neck.

Then there was a loud bang, and everyone turned to see Stars kick over her chair and shout.

'BROJA'KAR MIA!' she screeched at her mother, yanking her baby away and turning and running. 'MIA AND LEAVE ME ALONE!'

'NEG'AN!' Dena called after her daughter. 'NEG— STARS! COME BACK!'

Stars passed Ka'harja as she ran and he realised she was crying. Before he could do anything, though, Annanyn jumped up and followed her.

Sken put her hand on Ka'harja's shoulder to stop him following, and shook her head slowly. 'Give Annanyn a minute to calm her down.'

'But she's upset,' said Ka'harja.

'And I can tell you are too,' Sken sighed. 'You're not going to be any help if you're stressed out. She'll just feel it and it'll make her worse. What's wrong?'

'Nothing,' Ka'harja lied. 'I'm just homesick.'

With that, he downed the chunky soup he'd gotten from Coborn in a few gulps, and took the fruit platter Annanyn had abandoned.

'You want this?' he asked Sken. She shook her head and he ate the whole thing, fish and all.

'Ka'harja—'

'It's fine,' Ka'harja interrupted, jumping to his feet and returning to the abandoned cooking pot as Sken let out a defeated sigh. *'I'm fine.'*

Hands trembling, Ka'harja had another bowl of food. Then he scooped another serving into his bowl, which he basically inhaled. And another, which was gone in a few seconds.

He caught Coborn's eye as he finished his sixth bowl. She looked both honoured and horrified as he poured another, which he took to his mother instead of eating himself. He *wanted* to eat it, but he was too embarrassed to admit he was still hungry.

At least Coborn hadn't seen him eat Annanyn's leftovers.

He made his way back to the healer's caravan and pushed open the door— And immediately wished he hadn't.

Stars and Annanyn were sitting with Distro, and Dena was on Coff's bed. Nobody looked happy. Especially not poor Coff, who was avoiding gazes like they were poisoned arrows— Though he met Ka'harja's for a brief moment as the alchemist came in and gave his mother the bowl.

'What's going on?' Ka'harja asked.

'Kekik won't leave me alone! I know what I'm doing!' Stars snapped. 'I don't need to be told what to do anymore! I'm not a berr! I'm *not!* I'm tired of everyone treating me like a hakalika berr!'

'It's okay,' Annanyn put an arm around her and gave her a squeeze. 'Nobody thinks you're a child.'

'I just—' Dena put her head in her hands. 'I've raised berr before. I can help.'

'I can do it!' said Stars, tears welling up in her eyes. 'I can! I can! I can!'

'So... why are you all in here?' Ka'harja dared to ask it. 'Is Little Demon sick?'

'Na!' exclaimed Dena.

'Yi!' exclaimed Stars.

Ka'harja reeled back at the two as they began to bicker.

'He's just being fussy!' Dena huffed. 'It happens!'

'He's not eating!' Stars retorted. She sounded close to tears as she continued, 'He was born sick— What if he's sick again?! What if he *can't* eat?! What if it's something really bad and he zi'kaf?! I don't want to lose him!'

Ka'harja glanced at Coff, and the two shared a knowing look.

'You're not going to lose him,' Ka'harja promised. 'Coff'll figure out what's wrong. And if he's just being fussy, then that's a good thing! I don't think it's too big a deal to make sure, though. But maybe... we should all stop yelling? Listen to Demon, he's getting upset because of all the noise.'

Stars hesitated as Demon let out an unhappy blubber. Then she looked to the floor and pouted; not saying anything as Coff crept over and took the baby from her.

He looked terrified as he examined the child. He seemed to know that whatever

the answer was, he'd end up with one of the two nurlak unhappy with him.

'There's nothing wrong with him that I can see,' Coff said anxiously. 'But maybe.... Stars, can I just.... I, um... n-need a sample of your milk. Please, uh, don't be mad that I'm asking... i-it's for a good reason.'

Stars blinked at him. 'Why do you want it?'

'Th-There might be some— Something wrong with the taste or the, uh— The texture, that's making him fussy,' Coff picked up a squat cup. 'Um.... Th-This should work. Just... fill it? Or- Or half f-fill it. I-I don't need— T-Too much.'

'Fill it?' Stars' ears twitched curiously as she took the cup from the healer. 'With my milk? From me?'

'Yes,' Coff said gently.

*No!* Ka'harja almost gagged as Stars pulled up her shirt. *No, turn away! Look away— By the Eight why aren't you turning away?!*

'Is this enough?' Stars asked, holding the cup out to Coff. She flicked an ear when she saw Ka'harja. 'Are you okay, Ka'harja? You look lenta.'

'Yeah, no, I'm fine,' Ka'harja coughed. 'I didn't know it was... that easy to get the milk out.'

'Of course it's easy!' Stars giggled, covering her face with all four of her hands in a playful motion. 'Berr can't do things that aren't easy!'

Ka'harja flicked his tail, and then an ear, as his mother let out a loud bark of a laugh and fell out of bed.

'O-O-Oh Scara,' Coff gagged from Ka'harja's side. 'That's why he w-wouldn't feed— Oh, uh— Th-That's horrible.'

Everyone turned to Coff as he put the cup of milk on his desk and let out a half-wheeze to clear his nose.

'Does it smell bad?' Stars asked, taking the cup and giving it a sniff. 'Ew! That's mup gross! It didn't smell like that yesterday! Why does it smell like that now, Coff?'

'Y-You might be ge-getting s-sick,' Coff mumbled, motioning for Stars to put the cup back down. 'W-We need to ch-change your diet. Uh, at least for now. L-Let me l-look you over and make sure you don't have an inf— Infe-Infected c-cu-cut or-or-or sim-imilar.'

'Can't be *that* bad,' Distro scoffed, leaping from her place on the floor and scooping up the cup.

'No Distro d-don—' Coff cut short as Ka'harja's mother took a sip of Stars' milk.

'Oh, that's nasty,' Distro grumbled, wrinkling her snout and pressing back her ears in disgust. 'Even Ka'harja wouldn't drink this, and he *likes* bitter shit!'

'No, Mum, I wouldn't drink it because it's disgusting!' Ka'harja exclaimed, horrified at the thought. 'That came out of Stars! I'm not— I'm not drinking something that came out of my friend! That's *foul*—'

'I don't see what the fuss is about,' Dena snorted. 'You drank an entire jug of goat's milk yesterday. Why is Stars' milk any different from a goat's? It's just food.'

'Oh, honey, no,' Distro held out the cup for Dena and mock-gagged. 'I wouldn't call this *food*. Taste it.'

Ka'harja felt faint as Dena reached out to take the sample. He didn't realise what he was doing until he'd slammed into the door in his rush to escape. When he

did realise, he went faster; hurrying out the door and sprinting across camp towards the river. He smacked into Sken, and immediately puked on her.

‘Fuck that *burns!*’ Sken exclaimed, yanking a flask off her belt and emptying its contents over her skin to wash away the sick. ‘Oh Goddess. Ow. Ow. Oh. Oh Goddess, Ka’harja. What in the names of the moons is going on?’

‘Ka’harja?’ Stars’ voice called curiously from camp. ‘You didn’t try the milk!’

‘I WOULD RATHER *DIE!*’

‘Milk?’ Sken asked. ‘What milk?’

‘*Her* milk,’ Ka’harja gagged.

Sken flicked back her fins, hissing in disgust. ‘Eyugh! Let’s get out of here before she sees me, too.’

# Chapter 21

## On the Road; Somewhere Unremarkable Glif 29<sup>th</sup>, Year 10,053 AE

Things had calmed down since that morning. Ka'harja had enjoyed hiding out by the river with Sken until Stars had finally found them. Luckily, though, by then she'd forgotten about the milk and had instead started asking questions about Tucker.

*A therapy animal, Sken had said. To help her deal with post-traumatic stress disorder.*

Ka'harja wasn't sure what that was, but by the name he could guess that it was something stressful and traumatic. He hadn't asked her to elaborate. And neither had Stars.... Sken hadn't given them the chance before she'd hurried off and started the caravan moving again.

As dumb as it seemed, Ka'harja hadn't been able to stop thinking about it all day. Something about seeing Sken anxiously rush off had unnerved him; he'd thought she was tough. Well— She still was tough. She commanded the entire caravan just by raising her voice a little. And she'd stood up against the Har'pies when they'd hunted down Stars and Dena. And she could beat Lif, Trat *and* Baku in an arm wrestle— At the same time! She barely even broke a sweat with the three boys clinging to her!

That's why it was so odd to see her look so upset. So scared.

Ka'harja sighed and looked out of the caravan. They were moving at a walking pace. He could see that by how leisurely Felelor strolled into view.

'Lazy arse,' Felelor laughed, playfully giving Ka'harja the finger.

'I don't see why you all don't do it,' he retorted. 'It'd make travelling easier!'

'Walking's healthy,' said Felelor. 'Maybe if you did it some more, you'd find it easier to keep up!'

'Yeah!' Naranako chimed in. 'And— And if bandits see us all walking around they'll think: "oh no! Guards!" And won't attack us. So why not get up and give us a hand preventing an attack?'

'Nah, I'm good with this,' laughed Ka'harja. 'If they attack us, then you boys can just pull out those nice chunky weapons of yours and fight them all sexy-like.'

'Blood and gore isn't sexy,' Naranako shivered.

'I beg to differ,' snickered Felelor. 'Remember when I almost got cut in half?'

Every foxen and their mum was lining up to have a go with me! Shame I couldn't actually do anything, though, on account of almost being cut in half.'

'You almost got cut in half?' Ka'harja asked.

'Yep,' Felelor nodded and pulled up his shirt to reveal a huge scar, running across his chest from his shoulder to his hip. 'Right before I met Sken! Actually, it was from jumping in front of Annanyn when our boat was attacked by valenor.'

Ka'harja flicked an ear. 'You knew Annanyn before Sken?'

'We used to work at the docks in Canis La'Can's royal city,' Naranako explained. 'Protecting boats and stuff. We got hired for a trip to Dr'oy and back. Annanyn was one of the passengers on the return trip.'

'Annanyn's from Dr'oy?'

Felelor shook his head. 'Esle. She lived in Dr'oy for a few years, though!'

'What about the rest of you?' Ka'harja asked. 'You all know I'm from Heck'ne, but I don't know anything about you guys. Except that Coborn's from... I *think* it was Tyali?'

'Right on the gold,' said Felelor. 'But nah, most of us are from La'Can. Naranako and me come from the royal city. Same with Coff and Baku, though we didn't know each other. Lif and Trat come from some small town out near the Khya border, but moved to the city when they got out of the system.'

'The system?'

'Foster system,' Felelor clarified. 'They grew up in an orphanage. When Trat hit his teens, he took Lif and came to Ryala. They worked with us for a while before Sken and Koko showed up.'

'Sounds like they had it rough,' Ka'harja sighed.

'Yeah! I heard Trat's family died in a fire!' Naranako blurted. 'He was *freaking* out after your house burnt down. Would *never* admit it though. He's too much of a *big strong tough guy* for that. But he was really worried about you.'

Ka'harja winced as Felelor slapped Naranako around the head.

'What about Lif's family?'

'Single mother,' Felelor muttered. 'Overdose.'

'Ah,' Ka'harja looked away. 'That sucks.... Where's Koko from?'

'Oktoka,' said Felelor.

'And Krarf's from Bonark,' Naranako continued. 'Technically.'

'Technically?'

'His family owned a farm that was on the border,' Naranako grinned. 'So they owned land in two different kingdoms. Apparently they kept their crops in La'Can, and their house in Bonark! He's a citizen of both kingdoms, but his birth certificate's officially registered by the Bonark government.'

'Fuck, that's complicated!' Ka'harja shook his head and laughed. 'I don't think I'm going to remember any of this by tonight!'

'It's fine,' Naranako laughed. 'You can ask again if you need! You're fun to chat with! Oh— And Sken! Almost forgot about her! Sapious. That human country past I'reka.'

Felelor's smile disappeared, and was replaced by a concerned frown. 'But she hates talking about it. So don't bring it up.'

'Yeah, she hates to cross the border!' Naranako exclaimed. 'We had to do a delivery there a few years ago and she wanted to stay behind in Canis, that's how much it freaked her out! Koko only barely managed to convince her to go through with the job!'

'Great Star, that sounds bad,' Ka'harja sucked in air through his teeth. *He'd finally been distracted from Sken, and now the conversation was coming full-circle again....* And he wasn't sure how to lead the topic away from it. Maybe he could just change it completely? 'Uh— So— Dumb question— But uh.... Why do we always follow rivers? Like, there's always water a short walk away from where we are! It's weird!'

'Are you...?' Felelor sighed so heavily he stopped walking for a moment. 'Are you seriously asking why a caravan owned by *seces* stays close to water?'

Oh?

*Oh.*

'Right!' Ka'harja felt his cheeks flush hot. 'Seces. Fish ladies. River women. Lake... lesbians.'

'*Lake lesbians?*' Naranako bit his lip, trying to hide his grin. 'Oh, man, Sken would love that one.'

'Speaking of,' Felelor gave a wave, and Ka'harja felt the caravan give a jolt as it slowed to a stop. 'Sken! Break time already?'

'Yeah, it's a nice day and I thought everyone might enjoy the sun more if we weren't on the move,' Sken's voice floated through the wall beside Ka'harja, so he climbed out of the caravan and peeked around the side to see Sken, with a shockingly calm and well-behaved Tucker at her side.

She gave him a smile, but Ka'harja's stomach twisted when he saw the painful-looking welts that had appeared on her skin where he'd thrown up on her earlier.

'Anyway, I was wondering if any of you knew where Mum was?'

The boys stared at her in silence.

*Her... mum?* Ka'harja blinked dumbly.

'Um... say that again?' Felelor closed his eyes and flicked up his ears. 'I didn't catch that.'

'Koko?' Sken twitched her fins and pushed Tucker away as he snuffled at her side. 'Do any of you know where she's ended up? I think she went to sleep in one of the caravans, but I can't for the life of me remember which one!'

'*Koko,*' Naranako said slowly. 'Uh, yeah. I think she's in Coff's bed. I can go get her if you like?'

'No, no, it's fine,' Sken let out a relieved sigh and stroked Tucker. 'I was just a little worried. I haven't seen her all day, and a part of me was scared we might have left her behind.'

Naranako let out a laugh. 'Nah! Baku would *never* let that happen!'

'And even if we did, she knows where we're heading,' Felelor grinned. 'But we'll go let her know we've stopped; she's been wanting to get some training in with Baku and this'll be a good opportunity for that.'

'Thanks,' Sken nodded as the boys started towards the middle of the caravans. 'Oh, actually! I think we all need some proper time off. Let's call it a day and set up camp!'

Ka'harja twitched an ear.

Wanting to stop early for the day? That wasn't like Sken at all. From what he'd seen, she was usually stressed about losing time....

'You alright?' Ka'harja asked.

'Mm?' Sken took in a too-short breath and didn't turn to face Ka'harja. Instead she focused on patting her incarrah. It was as if she was trying to distract herself. 'I'm fine. Why do you ask?'

'You called Koko "mum,"' he blurted.

'*What?*' Sken exclaimed, her voice breaking as she turned to face Ka'harja. 'I did *not*— Did I? Seriously? N-No she's— She's not my damn mother! I wouldn't call her that!'

'You did,' Ka'harja gave a grin. 'Felelor and Naranako heard you do it too. Ask them.'

'Shut up!' Sken ordered with a laugh. She cuffed Ka'harja around the ears and then wiped her brow. 'Scara, I must be more exhausted than I thought....'

'Want to sit by the river?' Ka'harja offered. He wasn't sure how good an idea it was, but Sken had offered to listen to *his* problems... he figured could give her that same courtesy in return. 'We can get drunk and cry about being gay.'

Sken's gills squeaked a laugh and she shook her head. 'Alright. Grab me the Saviour?'

Ka'harja turned to open the wooden box in the caravan, but Sken flicked him with the blunt side of her tail.

'No— The whole crate,' she muttered, leaning around Ka'harja and lifting it onto her shoulder. 'It takes a lot for me to get any kind of drunk.'

'Jeez, you sound like you might be part foxen!' Ka'harja joked. 'You *sure* Koko's not your mother?'

Sken let out one of her loud, screechy laughs, and flicked her tail a few times. 'Goddess, you're hilarious! Come on. I've been around these parts before; there's a nice place to sit just up a ways by the river.'

Ka'harja stared at the sharp barb on Sken's tail for a moment before he realised she was beckoning Tucker with it. He grabbed a couple of foxen-branded drinks from the back of the caravan and quickly hurried after the secas and her pet.

They made their way down to the river, where Sken dumped the heavy box on the ground and (after pulling out a couple of bottles) sat on top of it. Tucker rested his head in her lap and she gave him a gentle tap on the nose.

'Cheers,' Sken held out her drink as Ka'harja flopped on the ground beside her.

They clinked their bottles together and then in one big, long scull, both emptied them.

'Great star!' Ka'harja coughed his way through the last mouthful of his drink. 'I didn't think you'd beat me in that!'

Sken laughed and dropped her bottle in exchange for another. 'I refuse to be second best at *anything!*'

It was obviously supposed to be a joke... but Ka'harja couldn't help but feel there was just a *little bit* of truth to it.

'So, what do you want to talk about?' Sken asked, finishing her second bottle the

same way she'd drunk the first.

Ka'harja shrugged, taking a much smaller sip of his own drink. He wasn't sure. There was a *lot* he was curious about right now. But nothing he was prepared to hear the answers for.... Maybe now was the time to ask.... 'What's Coff like?'

'Coff?' Sken's gills twitched curiously. 'He's alright. Koko reckons he works too hard. Which is saying something, considering she pushes people more than *I* do! But I think....'

'You think?'

'It's to distract him from something,' she finished. Then she cracked open another bottle of drink, which she drank slowly. 'He's always looking for something to do; when he runs out of work he'll tear down his shelves and rearrange them just to keep himself busy.... I keep telling him it's fine. But he doesn't know how to stop. Complete opposite of you. You don't seem to start anything.'

*Complete opposites*, Ka'harja sighed. Maybe his anxieties were right. He shouldn't try with Coff.

'You know he has twelve younger brothers?' Sken muttered. '*Twelve!* I can't even imagine what kind of pressure that puts on him.'

'Pressure?' Ka'harja's tail twitched. 'How could he feel pressured? He's not living with them.'

'He gets me to send almost all his pay to them,' Sken took another long drink. 'So does Coborn, actually. Sends all her pay to Coff's mum.... I think she likes her more than her own mother. And Baku. He sends his money home to his family, too.'

There was a moment of quiet, only broken by Tucker snuffling at Sken's leg. Neither Ka'harja or Sken seemed to want to say anything, though. So they sat in silence and kept drinking.

As they did, Koko and Baku raced across the field on the other side of the river. They both had swords, and swung them vigorously at each other as if putting on a show— And Ka'harja realised they were; Stars danced around them, clapping her hands and cheering as the two showed off their fighting skills with an exaggerated flourish.

A laugh came from beside Ka'harja, and he glanced at Sken. She gave a wave to Stars before leaning back and downing the rest of her new bottle.

'So... why'd you hire Coff?' Ka'harja asked. 'Why not someone else?'

'Coff's mentor,' Sken sighed, and looked at her scarred arm. 'He trained the healer who saved my life. I wanted someone with similar practices. His mentor didn't want the job, but Coff was interested. I was offering double what he was getting in his traineeship. And he was almost done with his studies, so it's not like he was a complete novice.'

'I'm sorry,' muttered Ka'harja.

'For what?'

'I.... I'm not sure,' Ka'harja took a swig from his drink so he didn't have to look Sken in the eye. 'That you've been through so much, I guess. It's hard.'

'It was a long time ago,' Sken replied with a sigh.

'I can't wait for *this* to be a long time ago,' Ka'harja admitted. 'It's weird. I was... finally starting to forget about Kay'oten and everything that happened in Heck'ne.'

And then it just... comes back to bite me. And burn down my house.'

'You'll be alright,' she said. 'Trust me, no matter how bad things get, there's always a way out again.'

'So far, my ways "out" have been a broken leg and murder,' Ka'harja stared out across the river. He wasn't really interested in watching Baku and Koko spar, but it was distracting enough. 'What... was your way out?'

Sken sucked down her gills with a loud popping noise and took a drink. She looked away from Ka'harja and after a few moments let out a long sigh. 'Dragged along a gravel road and left to bleed to death,' she said bitterly. Then she let out a hiss. 'I should have gone with my gut and kept my mouth shut.'

Ka'harja glanced at Sken from the corner of his eye, too nervous to turn his head to face her, and saw her staring viciously at the shredded webbing between her scarred fingers.

'Um, Raoul, I think I like girls,' her voice rose, as if she was mimicking her younger self. 'I know you said that I was supposed to like you, but I don't think I do.'

'Sken—'

'*Bastard!*' Sken hissed and threw her half-empty bottle into the river. It collided with a loud splash and sunk under the surface immediately, a stream of brown bubbles appearing as it disappeared. 'I'll kill him if I ever see him again!'

As harsh as her words were, her voice broke, and Ka'harja could see the hurt on her face before she buried her head against Tucker's back.

'My best friends tried to kill me,' her voice came out as a sob. 'But I guess that's just what humans are like.'

Her gills let out a mournful squeal, and Ka'harja felt his own chest tighten. He wasn't sure what to say or do to make her feel better.... He shouldn't have asked— Or even offered to drink with her. He should have just left it.

*Gods, he was an idiot!*

Why did he always have to make things worse?

Even after all these years away from Heck'ne, everything was *still* going wrong!

Nothing ever was the way it was supposed to be! And it would never be the same again!

He'd been threatened and hurt and humiliated. He'd lost his home and nearly his mother— And he still might, if her cough came back!

He couldn't bear that thought.

'Ka'harja?' suddenly Stars' voice was in his ear. 'What's wrong? Why are you crying?'

'Everything's wrong,' he sobbed, not looking up at his friend. 'Nothing's right. I want to go home! I ju— I ju— I want to go home! Plea-th— Tell me I'm going home again!'

'You *are* going home,' Stars said softly. She pulled his hands away from his face and held them gently against her chest as she wiped his tears away with her free hand. 'Please don't cry.'

Ka'harja heard a squeak and turned to see Sken sobbing into Koko's chest— But only for a moment before Stars gently turned him back to look at her.

She blinked, her beautiful blue eyes sparkling with tears, and Ka'harja felt himself calming down.

He felt... strange, looking at her like this. It was familiar. Like it had happened before.

Slowly, not completely sure what he was doing, he reached up and put his hand on her forehead to feel along the bumps where her second set of eyes should have been.

A shiver ran up his spine. 'Ith it th-tarting to rain?'

Baku glanced up and shook his head. 'Nothing.'

'I remember, too,' Stars leant forward and kissed Ka'harja's cheek. 'And I promise it will be mip. At least for the next nine years.... Because that's how long my last promise lasted.'

Ka'harja stared at her.

*Her last....*

A sad chuckle rose in his throat. 'You were right. It wa-th okay, wa-thn't it?'

'And it will be this time, too,' Stars told him. 'And this time we're both going to be mip, so it's even better. Not just you this time.'

Ka'harja sniffed, then sucked loudly on his tongue, trying to get it to fit right in his mouth again. 'Yeah. Yeah. That's right. Thanks....'

'Hm. So. Anyone else need to cry?' Koko asked, sitting between Ka'harja and Sken's crate of Seaweed Saviour. She picked up one of Ka'harja's drinks and took a sip. 'Or is it just you two?'

Baku nudged her with his foot. 'Be nice.'

'I am,' Koko rolled her eyes. 'Stars? What about you?'

Stars sighed and flopped onto her back; rolling over and disappearing into the long grass with a sniff.

'Guess that answers that,' Koko muttered. 'She's so sensitive.... Remember when I was like that, Sken?'

'No?' Sken blinked, and gave her gills a rub.

'Oh, right,' Koko grinned. 'That was you!'

Sken let out a snort through her gills. 'Ah! Those were the days!'

'Remember how you used to make bracelets out of seaweed?' Koko teased.

'Don't remind me,' Sken wiped her nose and rolled her eyes, then turned to Ka'harja. 'I didn't know you had a lisp.'

'Please don't tell anyone,' he swallowed. 'I don't want them making fun of me.'

'Why would they do that?' she asked. 'It's just a lisp! Do people really make fun of you for it?'

Stars rolled into view, flattening the grass as she flopped towards the trio. 'His yalfit used to beat him up and say his voice was tarnart.'

'Stars!' Ka'harja exclaimed. 'Don't— Don't talk about him! Please. *I don't want to talk about it....*'

'Sorry,' Stars said quietly. 'Do you want to go to sleep? That always helps me feel better after I've been sad.'

Ka'harja wasn't sure what he wanted.

'I think you should,' said Koko. 'You too, Sken. Go find Annanyn and take a nap'

with her. You need a break.'

Sken looked at the ground. 'I'm fine.'

'You're going to go give your wife a hug,' Koko grunted. 'Or I'm going to kick your shins in. Pick one.'

Grunting, Sken pushed herself to her feet. '*Fine.*'

'Ka'harja, go see your mother,' Koko demanded. 'No more drink. Just you, your mother, and a hairbrush. Go. Or you'll have to face Basher and Bruiser.'

Ka'harja gave a laugh as Koko kissed her fists.

'Bruiser's the more forgiving one,' Baku commented playfully. 'But Basher knows how to party!'

Koko scoffed and lowered her hands. 'Go on, Ka. Sleep it off.'

Ka'harja nodded. 'That sounds like a good idea.'

# Chapter 22

## Coff's Bed; Coff's Caravan Glif 29<sup>th</sup>, Year 10,053 AE

'Tell him!'

Ka'harja didn't want to open his eyes. He barely had the energy to twitch his ear as his mother cackled loudly.

He wished she wouldn't. Not now. He wanted to go back to sleep.

'Great Sca-Sca-Scara! I-I'm not telling him!' Coff's voice squeaked. 'Do you know how em-emba-emba-emba—'

'Breath in,' Distro chuckled. 'I know it's embarrassing. That's *why* you should tell him!'

Ka'harja wasn't sure he wanted to interrupt whatever they were talking about. He'd already had so many awkward moments with Coff... interrupting a private conversation wasn't about to help.

'I-I c-couldn't,' Coff managed. 'It— It was— So much—'

'It was just a dream,' Distro laughed. 'Besides, he dreamt about you last night, too.'

Ka'harja's hazy brain tried to put the information together.

Great Star were they... talking about *him*?

Maybe. He was too tired to tell.

'W-We were get-et-et— Getting m-ma-married,' Coff's voice came out as a wheeze. 'I s-sunk into the ca-cake and drow-drowned. He d-doesn't n— Need to know about it!'

*Sunk into the cake? Ka'harja turned the thought over. It sounded familiar. Coff had the same dream he had? But... how? How had Coff had the same dream? Was Coff a dream master?*

'Suit yourself,' Distro's humoured snort was followed by crunching as she ate something that sounded vaguely like— SHE WAS EATING AN APPLE!

He didn't mean to sit up. But suddenly Ka'harja was upright and staring at his mother.

She'd stopped mid-chew and was staring back with a huge grin on her face.

'Eighth child of the Ninth, Sweetheart,' Distro laughed. 'Did you have a good

sleep?’

‘*Apple*,’ was all he managed.

‘D-Did you ju-just wake up?’ Coff asked.

Ka’harja turned, and saw crimson blush spreading over the man, from his cheeks all the way down to his shoulders.

*No, I heard everything.*

Was that a good idea to say, though? Should he tell Coff he’d walked in his dream? It was already so embarrassing that Coff had seen the dream.... At least Coff didn’t realise what had happened! If Coff knew he was a dream master, he’d know that the dream had been Ka’harja’s and not his own.

‘K-Ka’harja?’ Coff asked.

Okay. *No.*

He’d say something.

He’d tell Coff that he liked him and maybe he would understand. Even if he wasn’t interested, he’d understand why Ka’harja had been so awkward and would be nice about it.

How to start, though? What should he say?

*Crunch.*

‘Apple?’ Ka’harja instinctively turned back to his mother, who stared at him with a smug grin as she chewed.

‘I think this is what woke him up,’ she laughed through her mouthful. ‘You want the apple, Sweetheart?’

‘Yes!’

What kind of stupid question was that? *Of course he wanted the apple!*

‘Too bad!’ she replied, taking another bite. ‘This one’s mine. Coborn’s making soup, though, so you might be able to grab one if she’s got any left over— Calm down, you don’t need to stand up so fast!’

Ka’harja hadn’t realised he’d gotten up. He stared at his legs for a minute before taking a deep breath. He needed to relax and wake himself properly before he thought about doing *anything* else.

‘Nap really took it out of you, didn’t it?’ Distro laughed. ‘You feeling any better than before?’

Ka’harja nodded. He felt a *lot* better. It was a good idea to sleep it off. Stars had been pretty smart suggesting it.

‘Aw, actually, you know what? Catch!’ Distro gave a laugh and —before Ka’harja had time to think— threw her apple to her son.

It was lucky he was able to catch it before it hit him in the face. But he was grateful to have it and devoured what was left faster than he meant to.

‘C-Core and uh, all?’ Coff managed. Then shook his head. ‘Not sur-surprised. It’s y-you.’

‘Should I be offended?’ asked Ka’harja. ‘Because it sounds like I should be offended.’

Coff blushed even darker and looked away. ‘N-No. I— Uh.... N-Need to— T— Talk to y-you ou-outside. P-Please.’

‘Oh, uh, okay,’ Ka’harja felt his cheeks grow hot as he followed the healer out of

the caravan. What did Coff want to say? Was Coff going to bring up the dream? Was he going to say he liked Ka'harja back? No. He wouldn't.... Would he? What if he did? What if—

'I th-think Distro's depressed,' Coff blurted as soon as the door clicked shut. 'I'm w-worried she might need m-m-more h-help that I c-can g-give her.'

'Depressed?' Ka'harja was taken aback. He hadn't expected.... It took him a moment to take in what Coff had said. 'You think my mum's depressed?'

'Yes,' Coff replied gently. 'I-I'm worried about her. I... tr-tried to-to— I tried— Tried to— Talk to her a-a-about it b-but....'

'But what?'

'Sh-She diagn-nosed me with "stupid" and th-threw a— Threw a book at me,' Coff muttered. 'I-I'm sc-scared to br-bring it up again. I was th-thinking m-maybe you could?'

Ka'harja shrugged. 'Maybe. I'm not surprised she's depressed. She's been through a lot.'

'You— You b-both have,' Coff told him, and Ka'harja felt the healer's tail brush against his leg in a show of sympathy. 'I think you sh-should b-both l-look into getting thera-therapy when we get to K-Ko-Ko-ka-k— Ko-Koka-ka-ka— When w-we g-get to Ko-Ko-Koka-Koka—'

'Kokako?' Ka'harja offered, though he didn't meet Coff's eye. 'Yeah. That sounds like an idea.'

Coff nodded.

Then they both went quiet.

Ka'harja felt awkward. Should he say something? It seemed like there was more to say. But *what*? What could he say? Maybe something about potions? Maybe he could bring up how nice he thought Coff's shelving methods were? They were good. *Really* good. He might even have to steal some of his sorting techniques for himself.

'D-D-Do y-you wan-want to-to-to-to-to—' Coff got stuck on the word. Then he stopped talking; pounding a frustrated fist to his forehead before he took a deep, slow breath. 'Ball with Baku?'

'What?' Ka'harja blinked. 'Do I want to ball with Baku— Oh, *play* ball with Baku?'

Coff nodded. And swallowed. And blushed. He looked as awkward as Ka'harja felt.

'Yeah— Sure. If you want to, I don't see why not,' Ka'harja gave a shrug. 'What sort of ball?'

'Jus-Just... *ball*,' Coff managed. 'Catch? A-As l-long as— As it's not k-keep away.'

'Aw, no keep away? But I'm *great* at that game!' Ka'harja joked. 'Mum and I used to play it all the time. Then I got too tall.'

'H— With two people?' Coff's voice rose in confusion.

'It's not too hard. The rule is you can't hold the ball for more than five seconds at a time. Lot's of throwing it up in the air. And also lots of elbows.'

Coff gave a weak laugh.

'Hey, so...' Ka'harja hesitated for a moment. Then he took a deep breath. 'Do

you think *I'm* depressed?’

Coff took a sharp breath in through his teeth. A sharp, very telling breath. ‘You.... You’re a l-lot of th-things.’

‘So, yes?’

‘Y-Yes,’ he admitted. ‘I think you’re de-depressed. An-And you have an anxiety. And— I think— You m-may have... AD— AD— Uh, ADHD.’

‘So I’m just a grab-bag of symptoms, huh?’ Ka’harja sighed. ‘What’s ADHD?’

‘You— Don’t know?’ Coff shrugged when Ka’harja shook his head. ‘A-Attention defi-deficit h-h-hy-hyperactive d-disorder. It’s a, uh— It’s a learning disability. Do you e-ever have t-trouble paying attention to things? Or— Or find y-yourself drawn t-to sounds or m-movements? Eas-Easily distracted?’

‘Shit, that’s my life,’ letting out a laugh Ka’harja shrugged. ‘The only thing I’ve ever been able to focus on was alchemy. And then it’s sort of like... I focus too much and lose track of time?’

‘Hyperfocus,’ Coff muttered. ‘It-It’s a symptom.’

‘Ah, cool,’ Ka’harja gave a nod. Then he spotted Baku by the river and gave a wave. ‘HEY! BAKU! WANT TO HANG OUT?’

Baku lifted a hand back. ‘Sure! Can Stars come? We’re in the middle of hide-and-peek! Help me find her?’

‘Sure,’ Ka’harja replied. ‘Where do we start?’

‘Anywhere,’ Baku shrugged. ‘I’ve been looking for her for at least half an hour now and I have *no* idea where she could have gone.’

‘*Hmm*,’ Ka’harja took a deep breath and scanned the field. Where could she— ‘She’s in that bush.’

‘What— How!’ Baku exclaimed, following Ka’harja’s finger to the river and poking at the bushes.

Stars sprung out of it with a laugh and grabbed Baku in a tight hug— She spun him around for a moment before stumbling, and the two of them ended up on the ground.

‘You got me!’ Stars giggled. ‘I was *mip mip* at it though! It took you *forever* to find me!’

‘And it wasn’t even me!’ Baku replied playfully. ‘Ka’harja’s the one who saw you!’

‘Was he?’ Stars beamed. ‘That means he gets to pick the next game!’

‘Ah, perfect!’ Ka’harja laughed. ‘Coff and I wanted to play catch.’

‘Oh! Oh!’ Stars clapped her hands together happily. ‘I’ll be so good at that game! I have four hands so I can catch things *really* well! What are we catching? Birds? Lizards?’

‘A ball, if we can find one,’ replied Ka’harja.

‘I have one with my stuff,’ Baku leapt off the ground and headed back towards the caravans. ‘Come on, we can see if Koko wants to play, too!’

‘Wh-What about C-Coborn?’ Coff asked.

‘Oh, yeah! It’ll be just like old times!’ Baku laughed, shouldering Coff as they fell into place beside each other. ‘We’ll put you in the middle and play keep away!’

‘Pl-Please no,’ Coff sighed, though the corners of his mouth turned into a smile.

‘Anything b-but that.’

‘What’s keep away?’ Stars asked curiously, her ears twitching.

‘You pick someone to make fun of, and keep the ball away from them,’ Baku explained. ‘It’s fun to put Coff in the middle. He can’t jump very high and is *terrible* at catching things. So it’s pretty easy to win against him.’

‘That sounds mean,’ Stars’ ears flicked back and her eyes widened. ‘Can we *not* play keep away? I don’t want to be mean to Coff.’

‘Aw, but he *loves* it!’ Baku teased, grabbing Coff and ruffling his hair. They both stumbled a few steps before Coff managed to shake Baku off. Baku let out a loud laugh and wagged his tail with joy. ‘He knows I’m just teasing, don’t you Coff?’

‘Y-Yeah,’ Coff sighed.

For a moment Baku faltered. His smile froze on his face— Or did it shrink just the smallest bit? Ka’harja couldn’t tell which it was. But something changed. His tail dropped and his ears twitched and something in his eyes looked different.... Then he slapped Coff on the back and let out a laugh that didn’t sound quite natural. ‘You okay?’

‘Y-Yeah,’ Coff shifted awkwardly. ‘I-I’m fine.’

Baku didn’t look like he believed him.... And Ka’harja hardly believed him, either.

‘Are you lying?’ Stars asked. ‘You don’t sound like you’re mup. You sound really mup. Like you’re very sad and not okay at all!’

‘I think he’s just stressed,’ Baku answered, cutting off Coff’s own reply. ‘He’s alright. And if he’s not, then me and him will talk later in private and figure it out.’

‘Thanks, Baku,’ Coff replied, his shoulders relaxing. ‘I see Coborn. Sh-Should we go get her?’

‘I’ll go grab her and the ball and see if I can find Koko,’ said Baku. ‘You guys get ready to play. If you don’t mind playing something else, besides catch, we could always set up some goals and play boys against girls. But I’ll see what the others think, first.’

‘Okay!’ Stars exclaimed, waving happily as Baku hurried into camp. ‘This sounds like it’s going to be a lot of fun! What are goals?’

‘Goals are... *things*, like a basket or a net, that you try and get the ball into,’ Ka’harja explained. ‘Every time you get the ball into one you get a point, and at the end of the game the team with the most points wins.’

‘Oh, that sounds like flakha fun!’ Stars clapped her hands and jumped in place. ‘Do we kick the ball or do we throw it?’

‘D—Depends on the game,’ said Coff. ‘I-I l-like throwing b-better. I— Find it har-hard to— To kick with my l-leg.’

Ka’harja frowned.

His leg?

Ka’harja *had* noticed something weird about it before. But was it really a problem? Coff’s limp didn’t seem half as bad as his own.

‘Oh, right,’ Stars nodded. ‘That *would* make it bakti. You’d just stumble and fall over!’

For a moment, Stars lifted up a leg and teetered in an exaggerated way— As if

she was showing Coff what would happen. Then she actually slipped and fell, and landed in the grass with a heavy grunt.

‘Like that!’ she exclaimed, throwing all four of her arms up but making no attempt to stand. ‘You’d fall over just like that!’

‘You okay?’ Ka’harja chuckled and offered her his hand. ‘Need help?’

‘Yes, please. I hurt my butt,’ replied Stars. She let Ka’harja pull her up and then turned to Coff. ‘Coff, I have a question. I keep forgetting to ask it when we’re alone. And I have to ask when we’re alone because my kekik said it’s very dreankot to ask. But I want to know. Can I ask you a dreankot question? Uh, I mean.... Dreankot means *rude*, and I want to ask a *rude* question. I don’t think Ka’harja will mind if I’m rude in front of him because Kekik says he’s really rude himself. And if I’m being rude and he’s *always* rude I think it’s okay to be rude in front of him.’

‘I— Uh—’ Coff fumbled with his hands for a moment before giving a weak shrug. ‘I s-suppose it’s o-okay....’

‘What’s wrong with Annanyn?’ Stars blurted. She waited a moment, continuing when she didn’t get a response. ‘The dots on her skin. Like what Distro used to have before she turned into a dragon. I think Ka’harja called them freckles? What’s wrong with her freckles? Sken’s ones are all bright and glowy but Annanyn’s freckles are always really dull unless she’s happy. Why are they like that? Are they broken? Is Annanyn broken?’

‘Uh— I— Uh—’ an awkward blush found its way across Coff’s face, and he shook his head. ‘Anna— Annanyn isn’t— Sh-She’s not broken! Sh-She’s a— A no-glow.’

‘A no-glow?’

‘Her freckles d-don’t wo-work properly.’

‘So she is broken?’

‘N-No,’ Coff sighed. ‘It’s— Like your e-eyes. Y-You only ha-have one s-set. That d-doesn’t mean you’re br-broken.’

‘*Really?*’ Stars twitched her ears curiously. Then her face lit up. ‘Ka’harja! Did you hear that? I’m like Annanyn! Isn’t that mip? Annanyn is mip! So being like her must be mip too! Does that make me mip?’

‘You’ve always been mip,’ Ka’harja laughed. ‘In your own way.’

‘You mean it?!’

Ka’harja nodded.

‘BAKU! BAKU!’ Stars exclaimed, leaping into the air with excitement and waving as Baku came into view. ‘KA’HARJA SAYS I’M MIP! I’M MIP, BAKU! BAKU! I’M MIP!’

‘Oh, we’ll have to see about that!’ he replied playfully. ‘I *might* believe it, if you can get past my goal-keeping!’

# Chapter 23

## The Floor; Coff's Caravan Merf 6<sup>th</sup>, Year 10,053 AE

Ka'harja couldn't believe it had been an entire month since he lost his home.  
A whole nine weeks.  
Thirty-six days.  
It felt like yesterday.  
But it wasn't. It was a whole month ago.  
It hurt his heart to think about.

Sure, lots of great things had happened in those thirty-six days.... He'd met Stars, for one. And Little Demon had been born for another. And he got to know Baku. And Coff. And Naranako and Felelor.... And Lif wasn't too bad.

Trat was a bit of an arsehole sometimes. But just sometimes. Other times he was alright.

Ka'harja sighed as the foxen's voice shouted something outside, and rolled over to stare at the roof again.

He didn't want to travel anymore. He was sick of it. Sick of having to walk around and talk to people and do things he never had to do at home with his mother. He just wanted to lie on the floor and count the water stains in the roof and pretend he had no responsibilities. But he couldn't even do that without getting motion sick. Not here in the caravans.

'*Depression,*' Ka'harja muttered. The word still felt foreign on his tongue. 'I have *depression.*'

It was weird to think he was sick. He'd never even considered the possibility until he'd talked with Coff about it. He'd figured that was just how he was. That was just how life was. He always thought that could feel happy, so how could he have had depression? But it made a lot of sense once Coff explained it to him.

'Depression.'

It was nice to know that what he was feeling was real.

And weird to think they were halfway to town now, according to Sken. One more month and he and his mum could settle down in Kokako Boaka and... he wasn't sure what they'd do there. Probably spend days at a time in the taverns.

Though after what Coff said, he wasn't sure he should be drinking anymore.

He'd always thought his mother drank too much. He'd never thought that *he* might drink too much, too. Not when he was comparing himself to Distro.... But now, after learning a little more... he needed to watch himself. He loved his mother, but he didn't want to turn into her. At least not that part of her.

He glanced up at her, snoring loudly in her bed, and sighed.

He loved her so much it hurt sometimes. He wasn't sure he could ever tell her just how grateful he was she'd taken him in. He could say it with words—and he had before, a hundred times— but it would never feel like enough. She would never know just *how much* he loved her.

The caravan began to slow, though Ka'harja's gut took a second to realise when they'd stopped.

A hard knock sounded on the caravan door and Baku yelled something about starting dinner and needing extra hands for setting up camp.

Ka'harja almost cursed at him. He didn't want to get up. He wanted to wallow in his misery in peace. But the camp needed help. And he was able-bodied. Somewhat. Mostly. Not *really*. But enough to lend a hand.

He could do the work they needed him to, at least.

He supposed he'd have to wake his mother, too. She'd been asleep all day and needed to get up. He didn't want to wake her. She was getting better and sleep had been helping. Even Coff had said it was best to let her rest as much as she could right now so she could sleep off her sickness.

Ka'harja shook his head and forced himself up. He had to wake her. No matter how much she slept, she wouldn't get better if she didn't eat.

'Mum?' he said gingerly. When she didn't respond he raised his voice a little. 'Mum? It's time to get up.'

No response.

With a sigh, Ka'harja leapt onto the bed and squeezed himself between his mother and the wall. He braced his legs against her and then—

Nothing.

He couldn't bring himself to push her out of bed today.

Instead he shifted until he was sitting beside her and let out a heavy sigh and wiped his eyes and held his breath— He didn't want to cry, but he just wasn't sure what to do anymore.

The moment he let out his sob his mother shot upright and turned to him.

'Ka? Sweetheart? What's wrong?!' she exclaimed, though her eyes were still mostly closed.

He almost laughed. 'If I knew it was this easy to wake you I'd have burst into tears every morning.'

'What's wrong?' Distro repeated.

'I'm not sure,' Ka'harja answered, wiping his eyes again. 'Everything? But also nothing. I just feel really shitty, I guess.'

'It's been a hard time,' said Distro. Then, her mouth opened wide in a very sudden, very loud yawn. It reminded Ka'harja of a snake for a moment, but then it ended and her mouth slammed shut, her teeth *clack*-ing together as she licked her

lips and snorted. 'Eighth child of the Ninth, it's a bright morning.'

'It's almost dinnertime,' Ka'harja corrected. 'Baku wanted help setting up camp but... I don't know. I just don't feel up to it—'

'NEVER MIND ABOUT SETTING UP CAMP!' Baku's voice shouted and he slammed a hand on the caravan door. 'THERE'S A DRAGON NEARBY. WE'RE MOVING ON.'

Before Ka'harja could let out his sigh of relief, Distro leapt out of bed and yanked the door open.

'Baku! I'm offended!' she cried out in a mocking tone. 'How could you! That very well might be one of my *cousins!*'

Baku let out a bark of a laugh, 'Well your cousin's a *dick* who's roasted an entire flock of wild sheep!'

'He prepared dinner for us!' Distro called back. 'You should be grateful!'

Ka'harja snorted his own laugh and wiped the last of the tears from his eyes. 'Great Star, Mum! Great Star.'

Distro turned back to her son with a wide grin across her face. 'At least you don't have to help with camp anymore.'

He nodded. 'Maybe I can nap until we find a new campground or something.'

'Or we could talk?' Distro suggested, plopping down on the bed. 'I've been asleep so much lately we've barely talked. I miss you. I wish I didn't have to stay in here all the time. It'd be nice to sleep by you again.... I still don't see why you've suddenly taken to sleeping outside with the others, when I'm right here!'

'You're sick,' Ka'harja lied. *Well...* he half-lied. It wasn't the *only* reason he'd joined the boys outside, though it *did* contribute to his decision... but it was mostly his embarrassment with how he felt about Coff that had driven him out.

That, and the teasing he'd received from Trat for sharing his mother's bed like he was still a kid. Felelor had immediately shut the man up, of course, but it still made Ka'harja blush to think about.

'What, you're scared I'm contagious or something?' Distro scoffed.

'Mum, you know have to rest *properly,*' Ka'harja pushed. 'And it's hard to do that when we're so cramped up. I keep stealing the blanket while we sleep— And you *need* to stay warm!'

'Warm, shmorm,' Distro snorted, flaring her nostrils and rolling her eyes. 'You're warmer than a stupid blanket! If you want to sleep outside so badly, I could always join you—'

'Not until Coff says it's okay,' Ka'harja said, firmly.

'You're only taking his side because you want to *bone* him,' Distro responded, her grin reappearing. 'Don't think I don't see how it is! You'd rather have *him* sleeping next to you than *me!* I'm being *replaced* by a *nerd!*'

'He's not a nerd!' Ka'harja retorted.

'He enjoys *math,*' scrunching up her snout, Distro made a deep, chesty gag of a noise. 'Math, Ka'harja.'

'Okay, he's a bit of a nerd.'

'He's a full-blown nerd,' Distro pushed. 'He likes math, hates sport, and he's *obsessed* with doing things by the book! Like, if a recipe mentions to not inhale the

powder? He'll use a medical-grade face mask—'

'To be fair he's a healer, so "medical grade" is—'

'AND! AND!' Distro raised her voice over her son's. 'He tried to get me to meditate with him! *Meditate*, Ka'harja! He claims its "therapeutic" or some shit.'

'Meditation is therapeutic!' Ka'harja rolled his eyes.

'So's getting drunk and banging six girls at once!' retorted Distro. 'But there's such a thing as *self-respect*—'

'Of which you have none—'

'Which I exercise *every day* of my life!' Distro grunted. 'So you'd never catch me *meditating*, thank you!'

'But banging six girls at once is fine?'

'Banging six girls at once is *great*,' Distro retorted. She slammed a hand on her knee and then paused, as if something had suddenly clicked. 'Oh Great Star. I just realised who stole my emerald bracelet. It was that *bitch*, Tarina!'

Ka'harja let out a loud laugh which he made no effort to smother as his mother's mouth hung open and her nose turned to a sneer.

'Fucking *Tarina*— No— No distractions, this is about Coff,' Distro shook her head. 'You know he writes books in his spare time?'

'I thought it was just the one?'

'Nope! Seven finished, three half-done,' Distro grinned, her teeth clanking together. 'He let me read some of his stuff. It's rough writing but the plot's pretty solid. I mean, rough writing's probably best considering it was also the outline for a game of Caves and Creatures he hosted for Baku and Coborn. Those games can get pretty out of hand.'

Ka'harja shrugged. He wouldn't really know. He'd never joined his mother when her friends passed through. He thought they were great —they were like family and he loved them dearly— but he wasn't a fan of their weird games.

*Ah, piss!*

They were going to be surprised when they showed up expecting their usual order of potions to deliver. He wondered how much of the wreckage would be washed away by rain and weather before they got there. Would they think the pair of alchemists were dead? Or would they assume they'd gotten out safely?

And their alchemy clients.... It would be weird that they went silent so suddenly. What would they think?

'What are you thinking about?' Distro asked, waving a hand in front of her son's face.

'Just— Aunt Denni. And our alchemy clients? What's going to happen to all of that?'

'Shit, yeah. I'll have to send everyone an update on our situation once we get to Kokako,' said Distro. 'Our clients can either keep with us or replace us. Up to them. Denni and the boys... they'll be fine for now. Probably. If I tell my father what's happened he'll make sure they know we're fine.'

Ka'harja nodded, letting out a deep breath. There were still so many loose ends to tie up from the fire. He couldn't believe how overwhelming it all was. He wished it was all over already. That he didn't have to follow anything up and constantly remind

himself of what happened. He just wanted to move on and forget about it....

‘Come on, Sweetheart,’ Distro shouldered Ka’harja and grinned. ‘It’s going to be fine. Look at the bright side: I haven’t coughed in ages!’

‘Three days isn’t that impressive,’ Ka’harja said tentatively. He didn’t mean to be so weary, but he was scared to be optimistic.

‘And tomorrow it’ll be a full week,’ Distro snorted. ‘So it’ll *become* impressive— Ah, fuck hold on.’

For a second Ka’harja wondered what his mother was doing as she leapt off the bed and headed for the caravan door. She yanked it open and made a guttural snort like she was sucking something out of her throat— Then she spat.

‘AH, DISTRO! That’s *foul!*’ cried Lif.

‘It didn’t hit ya!’ Distro called back. ‘Get over it!’

Ka’harja laughed as his mother closed the door and Lif’s cries of protest went quiet.

‘Sorry,’ Distro sniffed and wiped her nose on her sleeve. ‘What were we talking about?’

Ka’harja shrugged. He didn’t remember. Something about Caves and Creatures? No. That was before....

‘Want to break into Coff’s drawers?’ Distro asked. ‘We can find his private stuff and mess with it!’

‘*No!*’ Ka’harja cried. ‘I’m *not* breaking into Coff’s drawers!’

‘Aw, love’s turned you soft,’ winking, Distro sat next to her son again and snorted to clear her throat. ‘You wouldn’t hesitate if he were anyone else!’

‘I wouldn’t break into Sken’s drawers,’ Ka’harja defended.

His mother rolled her eyes dramatically and shook her head. ‘Because you’re scared of her. You’re not scared of Coff, are you?’

‘It’s just that I don’t want to upset him—’

‘Because you want to bone him!’

‘*Because he saved your life!*’

Distro shrugged.

‘He’s a nice guy!’

‘Alright,’ Distro raised a submissive hand. ‘I get it. I’ll stop teasing. You know I’m right, though. And I still think you should ask him out.’

Ka’harja sighed and looked away. ‘You think?’

‘I do think,’ she replied. ‘You two are perfect for each other.’

This time it was Ka’harja who shrugged. ‘Has he told you about his ex?’

‘Eh, he didn’t *tell* me. But I know about her,’ said Distro. ‘He talks in his sleep sometimes.... But I think you should still ask him out. Worst case is he says no.’

‘Okay, look, I’ll— I’ll think about it,’ Ka’harja felt his gut wrench— Then realised it was just the caravan stopping again.

Distro noticed, too. ‘Looks like we found a new campsite. Want to head out and set up?’

Ka’harja shrugged. ‘Not really.’

‘Yeah you do, come on,’ Distro grabbed her son’s arm and dragged him towards

the door. 'I'll sit you down next to Coborn and you can chew on her ingredients while she's not looking.'

'I'm not going to do that to her,' Ka'harja felt himself smile. 'She'd probably end up crying, thinking there are rats in the storage caravan or something.'

'Well, then, you can at least sit by the fire and watch the sunset,' Distro decided as she leapt down the steps into the wet grass. 'Instead of moping about inside like a lump.'

'I *like* being a lump though,' Ka'harja replied, following more slowly. 'Lumps don't have responsibilities.'

'Sure they do!' Distro replied. 'Lumps have to keep their mother company while she cleans the dishes. And they have to eat their vegetables. And they have to collect the firewood and make sure dinner doesn't burn.'

A giggle escaped Ka'harja as his mother dragged him over to talk to Coborn.

'Coborn, honey, you look like you slept on a rock,' Distro blurted.

'I— What?' Coborn looked up from the freshly-started fire and glanced awkwardly from Ka'harja to his mother and back. 'Th.... Thanks?'

'You need to relax,' Distro replied, putting one hand on the cook's face and fixing her messy bun with the other. 'Take some time off. Have a bath and soak your hair in unicorn oil.'

'I can't afford unicorn oil,' Coborn blushed. She looked torn— Like she wanted to pull away and run, but also like she wanted to collapse into the alchemist's arms and never get up again.

'I have a bottle I can give you,' Distro replied, continuing to fix Coborn's hair. 'It's not got much left in it, but it would do you some good to use it.'

'Mum, a bit of personal space?' Ka'harja suggested.

'Oh, piss off,' Distro laughed. 'Coborn doesn't mind, do you love?'

Slowly, Coborn shook her head. 'No, ma'am. I— Oh!'

Ka'harja hadn't noticed the ladle slipping from Coborn's hand until she'd dropped it— She tried to catch it but fumbled and accidentally knocked it into the fire.

'Oh, Scara—' she reached a hand in to grab it, but pulled away as the hot flames sparked at her. '*Dammit!*'

'Honey, it's alright,' Distro pet her on the shoulder and then carelessly reached into the flames. She pulled the ladle out and wiped the soot on her pants before holding it out to the cook.

Coborn stared at it for a moment and Ka'harja could swear he saw literal sparkles in her eyes— Which he quickly realised was firelight reflecting off the tears that were forming in the corners.

It took Distro giving the ladle a gentle shake for Coborn to take it back.

'What's that look for?' Distro asked with a snort.

'I— You're— I— Klict,' Coborn managed. 'You really are....'

*Klict.*

Ka'harja looked from the cook to his mother and swallowed. Coborn was right, wasn't she? His mother was blessed by Klict.... Did that make her special? Was she some sort of magical disciple of the gods, now?

Then he saw the look on Distro's face and remembered the time she'd tried to swallow a plum whole and choked, and the idea of her being anything but his mother shot from his brain like the plum had from her mouth.

'She's not Klikt,' he blurted. 'She's just a dumb foxen woman like you or me. I mean, you're not dumb. And I'm not a woman— I'm dumb and you're a woman? Do you see my point?'

'N... No?' Coborn blinked. Then she looked back to Distro and blushed. 'Sorry I — I didn't mean it that way it's just— You're amazing. And not *just* because you summoned Klikt.'

Distro shrugged and turned away. Then her ears perked up and she sighed. 'Oh, Baku, that log is *far* too big for you to move alone.'

Before Ka'harja could respond, his mother marched off towards Baku, who was struggling to roll a log towards the fire.

'Baku, you idiot!' she called. 'You need at least two people to push that! Let me help!'

'Coff said you're not to do heavy lifting!' Baku retorted.

'I'll heavy lift you in a minute!' Distro replied loudly.

'That doesn't make any sense!'

'*Oooh no sense!* You make no sense!' Distro mocked as she pushed Baku aside and lifted a leg to give the log a kick.

Ka'harja did *not* expect it to come flying at him and knock him down. But apparently it did.

His mother gave a horrified cry as the log collided with him and hurried over to push it off.

'Sweetheart! I'm so sorry!' she exclaimed. 'Are you okay?'

'That was... *amazing!*' Ka'harja managed. 'How did you do that?!'

'I...' Distro trailed off. 'I don't know. I didn't even kick it that hard? I didn't think I did?'

Ka'harja sat up, fast and stiff, and grinned at his mother. 'You're strong as *fuck*, now! You're *so fucking strong!* Great Star, that's *cool!*'

'DISTRO!' the angry cry came from a voice that *should* have been familiar, but somehow wasn't.

It took Ka'harja a moment to realise who the voice had come from; he saw Coff marching over to his mother and almost flinched away. He'd never heard the healer so angry!

'What— What w-was that?' Coff exclaimed. 'WHAT! Was that?!'

Distro shrugged.

'*Go to bed!*' Coff demanded, pointing back to his caravan.

'Coff—' Coborn started, then cut off. She rubbed her hand along her collarbone and blushed. 'Coff, she...'

'She's *awesome!*' Baku exclaimed. 'Did you see that?!'

'Y-Y-Yes I did!' Coff replied, still fuming. 'I d-don't c-care how ama-ama— How amazing it w-was! Sh-She's st-still sick! *Bed!*'

'I'm fine,' Distro protested.

'*Now!*'

‘Oof, alright,’ rolling her eyes, Distro turned to Coborn. ‘Cook fast so I can come back out sooner?’

‘Bed!’ Coff exclaimed, stepping between the two girls. ‘Now!’

‘Alright, I’m *going!*’ Distro raised her hands in a submissive gesture and shrugged. ‘Back to bed— Ka, Sweetheart, come get me when dinners ready?’

‘Stop st-stalling!’ Coff grunted, stepping around Distro again to get between her and her son. ‘And g-g-go—’

‘I’m not *stalling!*’ Distro huffed and headed off the way she’d come before. Coff trailed her closely as she continued complaining. ‘Do you think I would *stall?*’

‘Y-Yes! I d-do!’ Coff’s voice exclaimed as the pair disappeared behind one of the caravans. ‘You— You would st-stall not st-starving if you thought some-someone was t-telling you what to do!’

‘I eat on my own terms.’

Ka’harja twitched his ears as his mother began berating the healer, and bit his lip. He’d never heard Coff yell like that before. He’d thought the man more likely to burst into tears than argue with his mother. But it seemed he was tougher than Ka’harja’d thought.

‘Wow, haven’t seen him do that since he was in his apprenticeship!’ Baku snickered. ‘He hates raising his voice. But I’m not surprised. Your mother, well... Nothing else seems to work with her.’

‘That was...’ Ka’harja felt himself blush. He folded back his ears and dropped his voice to a whisper. ‘*Why was that hot?*’

‘Wow, so you *are* foxen!’ Baku blurted. ‘Don’t worry, your *secret crush* is safe with us. Right, Coborn?’

Coborn giggled, though she tried to smother it as she turned back to the fire and quickly began organising her tools.

‘What are you thinking?’ Baku gave her a cheeky grin and sauntered to her side. When she didn’t answer, he poked her cheeks and repeated himself. ‘*What are you thinking?*’

Coborn glanced back to Ka’harja, her face darkening in her own blush, before she quickly whispered in Baku’s ear.

‘HAH!’ Baku barked a laugh and nodded. ‘I knew *that* already.’

Ka’harja sighed when Baku gave him a happy nod. ‘That I’m gay?’ he guessed.

‘Oh, shit, you’re *gay?*’ Baku exclaimed as Coborn’s mouth dropped in surprise. ‘That’s *even better!* Do you *actually* like Coff?’

‘Uh...’ Ka’harja wasn’t sure what to say to that. He’d thought the two would have already heard from Koko, or Stars, or Coff, or Sken or Dena or Distro— Anyone, really, that he was gay. But the grins that spread over the foxens’ faces told Ka’harja they *hadn’t* known....

So what had Coborn whispered to Baku?

‘Man, you *do!*’ Baku clapped his hands together. ‘Tell him! No— Seriously— Tell him. He’ll love hearing it!’

‘I’m not— No!’ Ka’harja felt himself blushing and leapt to his feet. ‘I don’t like him, okay?’

‘*Because you love him,*’ Coborn murmured, so quietly Ka’harja almost missed it.

'Hey!' Ka'harja whined as the cook giggled.

'Welp, I better go check on Coff,' Baku pushed back his mess of a hairstyle and snorted. 'Distro's likely to dump another cup of water on him. And he needs to be *presentable* when you confess your *undying love* to him tonight.'

'I'm not— I'm not—' Ka'harja couldn't get the words out. He desperately wanted to argue with Baku as he walked away, but he just *couldn't*. He was too embarrassed, and flustered, and Baku was too right.

*Damn it.*

Coborn's continuous giggling caught Ka'harja's attention and he turned to her with a heavy sigh. She grinned back at him, though it was obvious she was trying hard to hide it as she lifted the heavy, half-filled cooking pot over the fire and threw in a handful of chopped carrots.

'Baku's not going to tell him,' Coborn reassured. 'And neither will I. That's not our business.... But *you* should.'

'I.... I don't know,' Ka'harja couldn't meet Coborn's eye. Was there any point in telling Coff? He'd had a girlfriend before. He wouldn't be interested.

'Tell him,' Coborn pressed, flicking her ears back and giving him a gentle nod. 'What's the worst that could happen?'

Ka'harja shrugged. What was the worst that could happen? *He embarrasses himself? He loses a friend?*

The first he could handle, but he didn't like the idea of that second one.

'Tell him,' Coborn repeated. She flicked him with her tail and gave him a smile— It was weak, but warm and genuine, and he felt a little less stupid. 'He won't be upset.'

'Maybe,' replied Ka'harja. 'Maybe.... I'm going to head off and... do stuff. You have... fun? Cooking. Like I mean, don't burn yourself or anything. I mean— Not that I think you would I just— I'm... dumb. I'm dumb. Have a good day.'

'You too,' Coborn replied as Ka'harja hurried away.

He wasn't sure exactly where he was going. He just knew he couldn't bear to talk about his crush on Coff again.

Maybe he could head down to the river? Or maybe he could—

*Oh, Trat does not look good,* Ka'harja sucked in a sharp breath through his teeth as he caught sight of the man.

He was sitting with Lif behind one of the caravans, looking pale and sick and like he'd been crying. Ka'harja wasn't sure what to do. Should he leave them alone? Should he say something? Trat had tried to help him before, so maybe....

Lif looked over, and Ka'harja gave an awkward wave. He received a slow shake of the head in response, and so he quickly turned away and slipped back into the main part of camp, leaving the boys to themselves.

He let out a long breath as he rounded one of the caravans, and almost walked into Naranako.

'Oh. You saw Trat, huh?' Naranako licked his painted lips and pulled a knowing face. 'Yeah. Felelor said he's having a hard time and to leave him alone, so...'

'What happened?' Ka'harja asked. 'I've never seen him like that before.'

'Uh, well,' Naranako rubbed his arm. 'He was the one who found the sheep. I

think it brought back some bad memories— He used to farm them. And... with the whole... fire thing....’

‘Oh,’ Ka’harja felt something drop, like his heart had fallen from its place in his chest and into his stomach. ‘Yeah. That would— That would suck.’

‘*Yeaaaaaah,*’ drawling out the word, Naranako licked his lips again, and Ka’harja noticed the colour was fading. ‘I haven’t seen anything trigger him like this in a long time. I think everything’s been getting to him. Your house. The fight with the Har’pies. Those sheep.... I saw him scratching at his scars before. Hasn’t done that in a while.’

‘Ah...’ Ka’harja wasn’t sure what to say.

And as it seemed, neither did Naranako. He just nodded and pursed his lips and shuffled his feet. ‘I should go help Felelor. He was going to... do stuff.’

Ka’harja was familiar with that excuse, having used it only a few minutes ago himself, and let the red-haired man duck past him and hurry away.

For a minute Ka’harja stood in place like an idiot. He wasn’t entirely sure what to do. Then he saw Coff milling about in much the same way and took a deep breath.

Maybe they could talk....

If Ka’harja could get his legs to move.

*Move!* Ka’harja willed himself. *Move, you stupid lump!*

Then Coff met his eye and started towards him and he realised he wasn’t really a lump— He was more like jelly. Wobbly, anxious jelly that wanted to melt into a puddle on the ground and pretend it wasn’t there.

‘Hey, K-Ka’harja,’ Coff gave him a friendly grin.

‘Mum says you’re a nerd,’ Ka’harja blurted. Then he mentally kicked himself. ‘I mean— She says that you write books.’

Coff’s friendly smile disappeared and was replaced by wide eyes. ‘N-Nerd? She s-said that?’

‘She was just playing. And I mean— *I* don’t think you’re a nerd!’ Ka’harja stammered. He realised how stiff he was standing and tried to make some sort of motion with his hand against his chest. He had no idea what it was, but it made Coff stare at him. ‘I like books. I mean, I don’t like reading. But I like books. I just have trouble reading? I can’t focus on them. I like when they’re read out loud, though.’

Were his hand motions too exaggerated now? Maybe standing still was better.

*SHIT!*

Now he was too stiff again....

For a moment, Coff stared at him. Then the healer looked to the ground and cleared his throat. ‘W-Well, ADH— ADHD c-can make it-it-it— Make it hard to read s-sometimes.’

‘Makes sense,’ Ka’harja managed. ‘So... what do you write about?’

‘Uh...’ red crept over Coff’s cheeks and he pressed his ears back. ‘F.... Fantasy. And r-r-romance.’

‘I like romance,’ Ka’harja tried to smile, though he wasn’t sure if it was pleasant or if it was too toothy. ‘Romance.... Romance. Romance?’

‘Y-Yes,’ Coff confirmed. ‘Romance.’

‘Romance. Romance. Romance...’ Ka’harja wanted to scream. Why couldn’t he

say something else? *Okay*. He was going to say something else. He was going to say something about alchemy. About how interesting enhance healing was, and how wound-closing potions only worked temporarily before the wounds opened up again. And he could talk about how cool it was that you could grow back limbs over time— And how uncool the side effects of doing so could be, and how most people regretted doing it because of them. Coff would know about that and it would be fun to talk about how much their professions intersected with one another. ‘So like... *romance*?’

‘Yeah,’ Coff wrung his hands. ‘Romance.... I uh, n-never really got a— A lot of it. So....’

‘Oh, yeah, your girlfriend,’ Ka’harja wished he was repeating *romance* again, but he couldn’t seem to stop himself as he continued, ‘Coborn said she threw a vase at her— I mean, that your girlfriend threw a vase at Coborn, not the other way around. Can you *imagine* Coborn throwing something at someone? I can’t.’

Coff just shrugged.

‘So what was she like?’ Ka’harja asked. ‘Your ex, not Coborn. I know what Coborn’s like. She’s nice. Your ex though? Obviously not fun. How’d you two end up together?’

‘Well, uh... h-her name was Tis-Tis-Tis— Her name was Tisimi,’ Coff let out a long, nervous breath and his hands moved to his shoulders. ‘Tisimi Tykia. She was h-half w-wolven. With th-the height to p-prove it.’

*Tall*, Ka’harja remembered Coff’s preference.

‘Sh-She uh...’ Coff stammered. ‘Appr-Appr— Approached me at a— At a p-park and said— Said w-we were g-going to d-date. And— And I was too sc-scared to say n-no.’

‘Oh,’ Ka’harja flicked his tail against Coff, trying to express his sympathy. ‘That sucks. Sorry to hear that.... She just *demand*ed you date her?’

Coff nodded.

‘That stinks.’

Gods, why had he said that? There had to be a better response. Anything would have been better than *that*!

‘Y-Yeah,’ Coff’s mouth twitched into a smile, and Ka’harja was surprised that he’d somehow managed to say the right thing. ‘It— It *stunk*. A-A lot.’

‘How’d you manage to break up with her?’

‘I— Uh.... I didn’t,’ Coff admitted, blushing deeply. ‘Sk-Sken offered me a j-job and.... And I t-took it....’

‘Oh, you just *left*?’ Ka’harja asked. He tried to smile back as Coff nodded. ‘Hey, same here. Running away from problems and not looking back is pretty much my whole thing!’

Coff just kept nodding. He looked like he wanted to say something, but Ka’harja wasn’t sure what it was as he bobbed his head up and down over and over and bit his lip.

‘So... you been with anyone since your ex?’ Ka’harja asked. ‘Or just her? If you’re even looking, I mean. Do you like anyone?’

That stopped Coff from nodding. His cheeks went so red Ka’harja wasn’t sure he was still breathing. Then he cleared his throat and looked to the ground and licked his

lips anxiously. 'Y-Yes. I.... I like someone.'

'Really? Who?' Ka'harja asked. He couldn't stop a little bubble of jealousy forming in his chest... whoever it was had *no idea* how lucky they were! He waited for Coff to respond, but the poor man fumbled with his words so much Ka'harja had to put a hand on his shoulder and remind him to breathe. 'It's fine. You don't have to say.'

'N-No, it's... uh.... I like—'

'No, don't tell me. I'm better off not knowing,' Ka'harja interrupted. 'I'd probably just blurt it to them like a moron!'

Coff swallowed. 'No, Ka'harja, it's— It's— It's y—'

'It's fine,' Ka'harja reassured. 'Look, I'll head off. I've obviously.... I'm stressing you out. Sorry for all the questions.'

'Ka— *Ugh...*' Coff gave a defeated shrug as Ka'harja waved goodbye.

Unsure where to head after so many awkward conversations, Ka'harja quickly scanned the camp and spotted Coborn— Who was staring at him with a... he wasn't exactly sure *what* kind of expression she was making at him.

He figured talking to her was better than turning around to Coff again, and quickly hurried over.

'What's wrong?' he asked. 'What's with the face?'

'It's... nothing,' Coborn turned back to her food. She began chopping some sort of green vegetable Ka'harja would never have chosen to eat on his own, and sighed. 'So.... Did you ask Coff out?'

'No,' Ka'harja let out a sigh of his own. 'No point. He has a crush on someone.'

Coborn took in a sharp breath and bit her lip. Her chopping got louder and she focused so hard she frowned. 'Did he tell you... *who*, exactly?'

'He tried, but had trouble. So I told him it was fine,' Ka'harja shrugged. 'Figured if I knew I'd probably tell them by accident.'

'*Scara!*' Coborn chopped so hard her grip on her knife slipped, and she barely missed her fingers. 'Absolutely useless!'

'No you're not,' Ka'harja put a hand on her back. 'You're a good cook.'

'I wasn't—' she took a deep breath as her hand met her tattoo, and let it out again slowly. 'Not talking about myself.'

'The knife?' Ka'harja guessed.

She paused for a moment. '*Yeah*. Sure. The knife.'

Ka'harja wasn't sure why she was using that sort of tone. It was definitely a contrast to the conversation they'd had about ten minutes before. She seemed... upset.

'Are you okay?' he managed.

'Fine,' Coborn replied. 'Just a little frustrated.'

'Should I ask what about?' Ka'harja hoped he sounded like he was offering support, and not making fun of her.

'You really just walked off on Coff, huh?' her voice was so flat it felt as harsh as Koko's angry glare, and Ka'harja flinched away.

'Is.... Is that why you're upset? I didn't mean to be rude to him, I just— He seemed stressed and I didn't want to make it worse so....'

'You should have let him finish what he had to say, at least,' Coborn replied with a sigh. 'People *never* listen to him.'

'Sorry,' Ka'harja rubbed the back of his neck. He glanced back to where he and Coff had been talking, but the healer was gone. 'I should say that to him though, shouldn't I?'

Coborn nodded. 'He likes you a lot, you know. He said.... He told me you talk *to* him. Not *at* him. It's rare he finds someone patient enough to listen.'

Ka'harja shrugged. He'd never considered that before. Coff just... had a lot of interesting things to say. There wasn't any reason to *not* listen to him, usually.

He realised Coborn had a point. It probably hurt a *lot* that Ka'harja had cut him off before. Especially since it was something so personal he was trying to share.

Before Ka'harja could say anything, Coborn shook her head and pulled her hand from her collarbone— And Ka'harja finally caught a glance of her small, dark pink heart tattoo before she readjusted her shirt again.

'So...' Ka'harja blurted. 'Who do you think it is that Coff likes?'

Coborn just stared at him like he was an idiot.

'Oh, I suppose it'd be obvious to you, wouldn't it?' Ka'harja rubbed the back of his neck again. 'You've known him so long. I imagine you can tell who it is.'

'Yes he.... He told me who,' Coborn replied. She refused to meet Ka'harja's eye and focused on her cooking instead, pulling out a pile of weird-looking vegetables and packets of herbs that Ka'harja only sort-of recognised as ingredients to a few pick-me-ups he might have made in his own profession.

'Who?' Ka'harja asked. 'Or, I mean.... I guess you can't really say, huh? None of my business. But I'm curious— It's not Koko, is it? She's not really his type, plus the whole Baku thing.'

'No it's... *not Koko*,' Coborn confirmed, continuing to avoid eye-contact. Then she gave a humoured snort before finally putting down the food and half-looking at Ka'harja. 'But now I'm curious.... Who do *you* think it is?'

Ka'harja hesitated. Who *did* he think it was? It wasn't Coborn herself— She'd probably not keep it a secret, and how absolutely *disgusted* she'd seemed when he suggested they'd dated before was pretty telling how the two saw each other. Koko was not it. Maybe it was Annanyn. Did Annanyn seem his type? Maybe. Although... he couldn't imagine Coff being able to look Sken in the eye if he liked Annanyn. Did he like Sken? Not likely. She was terrifying. And he was timid. Not his type at all.

That was all the caravaners.

Was it even one of the caravaners?

He looked at Coborn, who stared back. After a moment of silence he sat on the log beside her and clasp his hands tightly, trying to think.

*Maybe it's not a caravaner*, he thought. *If it was, would he be so nervous? Or would he just tell them? He knew them all well enough to tell them that sort of thing, didn't he?*

So... that left.... Dena, Distro, and Stars.

Dena was old. Like, in her fifties. And she looked old. And she acted old. And she was tired and grumpy and didn't really talk to anyone much, let alone *Coff*....

And his mother was also older.... Not as old as Dena. She was only in her mid-

thirties.... But she was still way too old for Coff to be interested. At least, he *hoped* she was too old for Coff to be interested. Because that would be an actual *nightmare*.

So that left Stars.

Stars.

Ka'harja could see that. Stars was sweet. And considerate. And she spent a lot of time with Coff. It wouldn't be surprising if he had feelings for her.

'I think.... I think I know,' Ka'harja muttered.

'Oh, thank the Goddess,' Coborn gave a relieved sigh and grinned. 'It took a while, but you finally see it? It's so obvious how much he likes yo—'

'I can't believe he's into Stars!' Ka'harja exclaimed.

'*What?!*'

'I have to go!' he blurted. 'I have to find Stars *right now!*'

'Ka'harja!' Coborn called after Ka'harja as he bolted away. 'Ka'harja we just talked about walking away halfway through— UGH! NEVER MIND! *FORGET IT!*'

For a second, he wondered if he should turn around and go back. But, then again, he figured there was not really any point. He'd apologise later, after he talked to Stars about—

Shit. What was he even going to say to her about it?

He stopped hurrying around camp and took a deep breath.

He couldn't just... *tell* Stars that Coff liked her, could he? That'd be as unfair as Baku and Coborn telling Coff about *his* crush.

Should he maybe find Coff then, and ask Coff? That sounded like a better plan.

'Hey Ka'harja, are you alright?'

He nearly jumped out of his skin as Annanyn put a hand on his back.

*Great Star!* Could he not go *anywhere* in this place without someone trying to talk to him?!

'Yeah, I'm fine,' he lied. 'Just... thinking.'

'About Coff?' Annanyn asked.

'Wh-What makes you think that?'

'I saw you two talking. It looked awkward,' she gave him a sympathetic smile and readjusted Little Demon in her arms. Ka'harja had almost missed the tiny little lad until he'd let out a tired murmur.

'Hey, you little fucker,' Ka'harja couldn't help bending down and smooching the boy's nose.

'Don't call him that!' Annanyn gasped, quickly planting her own kisses over the baby. 'You're not a *swear-word!* You're a *brave little man!*'

Ka'harja couldn't help but giggle. 'I mean, I'm not good with kids, but I'm pretty sure it's okay to swear in front of a one-month-old. He's not going to repeat it!'

'You're right, you're *not* good with kids,' Annanyn scoffed. When she was done rolling her eyes her smile returned, creasing her chubby cheeks against her eyes in a cheeky grin as she gave her fins a happy flick. 'I'm so lucky Stars is letting me look after him. I can't wait to adopt my own little *cutie!*'

'Right, coz you and Sken are both girls!' Ka'harja blurted. 'I mean— Well yeah.... Because of that.'

He was glad Annanyn had a sense of humour.

'Yes,' she giggled. 'Unless the gods put a child in me, I really doubt it's going to happen any other way.'

'Right,' Ka'harja coughed. 'So.... How is Sken? I haven't seen her all day.'

'Busy,' Annanyn replied, her shoulders sagging as she sighed. 'I haven't seen her much, either.'

'Sounds lonely,' he wasn't sure if he should put a hand on her shoulder? Maybe.... *Oh gods why was she so sticky?!*

Ka'harja remembered she was a seces at the last moment, and swallowed the sick feeling that her slimy skin left in his chest.

This was a mistake. But he couldn't just take his hand away, now.

Maybe a quick pat?

*Pat pat.*

Was that enough pats?

Maybe he should....

*Pat.*

That seemed about right.

'Are you sure you're okay?' Annanyn asked carefully. 'You don't seem okay.'

'I'm fine,' he repeated his lie, though this time it came out a little less confident. And this time, it was obvious Annanyn didn't believe him.

'Would you like to come sit with me?' she offered. 'In my caravan. I have to double check the books —stock and stuff— and it'd be nice to have some company. We don't have to talk or anything.'

'Uh, sure,' Ka'harja liked the idea of that. Just quietly blending into the background was when he felt most comfortable.

Annanyn nodded and then, as if to prove she wasn't going to bother him by talking, turned around without another word and began her way back to her private caravan.

She held the door open for Ka'harja, who wasn't sure if his quiet *thank you* was heard. But he was too embarrassed to repeat himself and instead plopped himself down on the floor next to the bathtub-bed and rubbed the tense muscles in his neck.

Annanyn took her place at a small, book-covered desk that resembled Coff's and began carefully moving stacks of paper from a nearby shelf onto her workspace. She kept Little Demon in her lap as she worked; gently keeping one hand rested on him as she scribbled away.

Ka'harja felt... awkward, sitting in silence. He knew Annanyn had said they didn't have to talk but he— He actually sort of *wanted* to talk to her? He couldn't believe it. Just a month ago if she'd come over he'd have retreated into the pantry and hidden away to avoid talking. Now he had the urge to start a conversation with her....

Would it be rude to talk while she was working? Should he say something or should he keep quiet?

He watched her write for a few more minutes before finally deciding to say something.

'That's a lot of math,' he offered. 'I'm not too good at math. I know that's not the best thing to hear from an alchemist but.... Uh.... I've just never been able to sit

down and focus long enough to figure it out. You know?’

‘Oh, yes, I understand *completely!*’ Annanyn’s excited tone reassured Ka’harja he’d made the right choice as she turned in her chair and raised her gills. ‘I used to be *terrible* at it! So terrible my parents actually considered sending me to the Gallamor to study! But luckily for me, while my surrogate was looking into it my genitor got offered a job in Dr’oy, and they forgot about it during the move. I wasn’t going to remind them. Until I got fired from my first job for *math-related reasons*. Then my surrogate lost xer mind! Xie started talking about sending me to boarding school again, so I faked a job offer from a shipwright in Canis La’Can. I’d say it was a mistake, because that place was *cold*, but I met Sken there, so not really. And— *And...*’ she covered her mouth. ‘I just blurted all that out, didn’t I?’

‘Keep going,’ Ka’harja grinned. ‘How’d you and Sken meet? I want to hear it!’

The look on Annanyn’s face was well worth the high-pitch *scree* that escaped her gills as she giggled. ‘Well, I met Sken a couple of months after moving to La’Can! I was looking for a place to stay, but not many people wanted to give board to a sixteenth-eclipser without a job— And not many places wanted to give a job to someone without a mailing address. So I... may have stolen a few wallets and tried to fake being a lady called Luronne.’

Ka’harja was so shocked he almost laughed. He couldn’t believe Annanyn had ever broken the law! She always seemed so sweet! But here she was, lying to her parents, running away from home, stealing wallets and— ‘*You stole someone’s identity?*’

‘Tried to. Only she was pretty well-known, so it didn’t work. I was just lucky she didn’t press charges,’ Annanyn shook her head and grinned. ‘I was legally an adult by secas law, and old enough to live alone by wolgen law, so if she hadn’t had a sense of humour I could have ended up in jail!’

‘Shit, you were a *rebel!*’ Ka’harja almost wanted to tell her his own wild adventures stealing and lying his way through life— But bit his tongue. He’d stolen from *her*, after all. It was a bit more awkward to explain than stealing from a complete stranger.... Though she’d been a stranger when he’d done it.

‘*Don’t swear in front of the baby!*’ Annanyn scolded in a hushed voice. Though, she grinned again as she continued, ‘Needless to say, they booked me a boat back to Dr’oy. Which I missed four times before they gave up on me. Then I saw Felelor again— Oh, I don’t think I told you how we met?’

‘I don’t think I’ve heard it, no,’ Ka’harja chuckled. *Had he?* He didn’t remember hearing about it, but... it also didn’t sound *completely* unfamiliar. *Maybe he had?*

‘We met when I was on the boat heading to Canis,’ Annanyn flicked her gills and smiled widely. ‘We were attacked by some rogue valenor, and he saved my life. He almost got himself killed, doing it.... But when he saw me again he was an absolute sweetheart, and let me stay at his place while he was recovering from his injuries. In return I had to do things for him that he couldn’t do. Like getting groceries. The local shopkeepers shadowed me whenever I *dared* set foot in their stores, though, and apparently Felelor got a few letters about what I’d done.’

‘Ooh, *letters?*’

‘Yeah,’ Annanyn giggled. ‘I don’t think he really cared too much. I’m grateful for

that, because it got cold really fast and I was a stubborn teenager.... I would have frozen before I went home. It was actually one of the cold days I met Sken! I went to the market to pick up potatoes with Naranako and bumped into her in the crowd.... I remember the look she gave me; I think she just fell in love with me on the spot. She offered to carry my bags— Sort of. She was really flustered and couldn't get the words out, and it was cute, so I asked if she wanted to walk with us and, well.... Two years later we got married and started travelling.... Oh, Scara. This was meant to be about math! I'm so sorry. If I even *think* of Sken I just sort of... get distracted.'

'You tell stories like I do,' Ka'harja chuckled.

Annanyn's cheeks blushed a deep green and she bit her lip. 'So much for not talking, huh?'

'I started it, and I really enjoyed hearing about your life!' he replied, moving to sit on his tail so Annanyn wouldn't see it wagging— But he realised too late that he'd only drawn attention to it, and looked away as Annanyn giggled. 'Hey— Uh, maybe a bit personal, but in all honesty... I've never been in a good relationship before and I was curious.... What do you two do when you fight? *If* you've ever fought before? I always seem to fall out with my boyfriends over one thing or another. Any advice?'

'We disagree on plenty of things,' Annanyn's impish grin returned and she leant in close. 'But usually I just compliment her muscles and she caves and lets me get my way.'

'Somehow, I don't feel that would work for me,' Ka'harja gave a dramatic sigh that ended with an involuntary giggle. 'But yeah, I've seen you do that to your *wuvly Skenny-poo!*

'Shh!' Annanyn covered her mouth and clamped down her gills, trying to muffle her snicker. 'Great Star, Ka'harja! Don't! She'll hear you!'

'*Weally? You weally weally tink so?*' Ka'harja teased. '*Your big stwong kelp knot will hear me? Wot will she do to me?*

'I'll beat the living shit out of you, is what!' Sken's voice nearly gave Ka'harja a heart attack.

He was on his feet before she managed to shut the door, and was halfway to the back of the room before Annanyn made it the three steps forward to kiss her wife.

'You're done setting up camp?' she asked, a desperate hint in her voice as she buried her face into Sken's chest. 'I've missed you!'

'I've missed you too, puddle-hopper. *Sorry today was so long,*' Sken whispered into the top of Annanyn's head. She breathed her in for a long moment before pulling away and turning to Ka'harja, her dreamy eyes turning into a death-glare as she flicked her barbed tail in his direction. 'If I *ever* hear you call me "kelp knot" again....'

'I understand.'

Sken gave a humoured snort before putting her arms back around Annanyn and grinning. 'I caught you a walleye.'

'Skewered it with your tail?' Annanyn's freckles lit up as she stood on her toes and tried to nip Sken's cheek.

'Nope! Punched it!' Sken flexed her arms. 'One hit and it was out!'

'Scara, you're *so strong!*

Ka'harja felt like he should leave. But the girls were standing in front of the only

exit.

It didn't really matter, though, because before he could consider his next move, Sken turned back to him and blurted, 'So Baku said you have a crush? Is that what all that moping around has been about?'

He wished he was dead.

'You *do*?' Annanyn gasped. And before anyone else could say anything, she let out another. '*Coff*.'

He didn't have the energy to argue, and just sunk to the floor again.

'Oh, that's why you two have been so awkward!' Sken's gills screeched a laugh as she joined Ka'harja on the floor. 'You should tell him.'

'So people keep saying...' Ka'harja almost continued, but there was a knock on the caravan's door and Stars called to Annanyn, too quickly for Ka'harja to catch *exactly* what she'd said, but cheerful enough that he wasn't surprised when Sken shouted for her to come in.

'Is he in here?' Stars asked. Before anyone could answer she saw Annanyn, holding her baby, and her face broke into a wide smile and she held out all four of her arms. 'Oh, my taa'han Little Demon! I missed you bini much, farfah katka! Annanyn! Thank you for looking after him, Annanyn! It was very nice of you! Eewowm.'

Ka'harja watched as Stars embraced Annanyn tightly. Then he heard a *clump* behind him as Sken's tail hit the wall— No, she'd *stabbed* the wall. He dared a glance at her face and could swear he caught her jealous glare before she forced a grin to her lips and pushed herself up.

'She's the best, isn't she?' Sken put an arm around her wife and eased between the girls, separating the two from their hug as she pulled Annanyn protectively against her side.

'Oh, no,' Annanyn reached a hand around Sken, and Ka'harja saw her smack her wife's twitching tail-barb before resting her hand on Sken's hip. 'It's selfish, really. I *enjoy* looking after him!'

'That's mip and good! It would be really sad if you didn't like him. Because he's wonderful and perfect and I love him a whole lot!' Stars lifted her baby into the air and gave a wide smile as he blubbered happily. 'Do you understand, my Little Demon? I kosson you lots! You are the mip kama tia'fio that was ever born!'

Sken let out a genuine laugh before letting go of her wife and putting her hand on Stars' shoulder instead. 'He's fantastic. How's his weight going?'

'He's gained a lot! Coff said he's much healthier then he was before! Very mip!' Stars grinned. But then, her face fell, and she pulled her son close and shivered. 'But he's still worried because.... Dassen milk is full of a lot of nutrients. And I'm nurlak. And it's all so scary because Coff says if I can't feed him properly he could get sick again. And if he gets sick he might break and be mup parsa.... And I don't want him to die. I want to keep him....'

Sken's arms found their way around Stars, and stayed that way for a long while before Stars sniffed and pulled away to wipe her eyes.

'But he's not sick,' Stars said firmly. 'And he's not parsa. And he's going to be okay and get big and strong, and I'm going to make sure he's happy and— And Koko and Baku and Coborn and Krarf are teaching me about everything, so that I can teach

it all to him when he's old enough to learn it. Like how to cook and read and sing!

'Sounds great,' Ka'harja grinned.

'Oh!' Stars jumped. 'Ka'harja! I didn't see you! I'm sorry. I would have said abbtah and hugged you if I saw you.... Are you okay? You look sad.'

Ka'harja shrugged. 'It's been a big day.'

'Oh, I know what those are like,' Stars nodded and folded down her ears. 'And Baku said you've got a secret kosson.'

He almost swore. *Why* was Baku telling everyone about his crush? He wished the man wouldn't....

'I didn't tell him it was Coff, in case he didn't know. But I think he might have known.'

'You— What?' sputtering, Ka'harja found his feet and began pacing. 'How is everyone guessing? It's not *that* obvious, is it?'

'Yi. It is,' Stars confirmed. 'You get really nervous and blush a lot when he's around, and you smile when you talk about him. Even more than when you talk about your kekik Distro! And you smile a *lot* when you talk about your kekik Distro. It is easy to see he makes your esiba go gighi!'

Annanyn giggled as Sken cast her a cheeky glance, and Ka'harja felt more self-conscious than he could ever remember feeling before.

'You should tell him!' Stars blurted, much to Sken's amusement. 'It's dinner and everyone is getting food from Coborn, so he'll be there, too!'

'What's the point?' Ka'harja sighed. 'He's not gay.'

'How do you know that?' Sken asked with an amused scoff.

'Have I ever been that lucky?'

'But you won't know until you ask!' Stars exclaimed. 'Oh— Or I can ask him for you! My kekik says you're a coward and that you're kizza taa'han enough to do things and always avoid doing things you should do— And this is something you should do! So it makes sense that you're avoiding it! So I'm going to be a mip friend, and I'm going to tell Coff for you! Obbtah!'

'*NO!*' the word was barely out of his mouth by the time Stars was out the door. He tripped down the stairs as he tried to follow her and couldn't help letting out a defeated cry as his leg cramped. All he could do was roll over uselessly as Stars disappeared into camp.

Sken's hand appeared at his side as he wallowed in the grass, and he almost refused to take it until she bent down further and laughed at him.

'Come on,' she said as she helped him up. 'Coff's always late to eat. We can meet her at the fire and convince her to keep quiet.'

He wasn't sure he had the energy.... But he followed Sken anyway.

Sken was right, Coff wasn't at dinner yet. But everyone was watching Stars curiously as she glanced around, so quick Ka'harja couldn't keep up with where she was looking.

'Pebble, what's wrong?' Dena asked.

'I'm looking for Coff,' Stars explained. 'I have to tell him something important! I have to tell him that—'

'*NO!*' Ka'harja exclaimed, rushing to her and throwing his hand over her mouth.

‘Don’t— Just— *Don’t!*’

Stars stumbled for a moment before rolling her eyes and pushing Ka’harja off her. ‘Why not?’

‘Because!’

‘Because *why?*’

‘It’s my business!’

‘It’s his business too.’

‘No! No, it’s *not!*’ Ka’harja felt himself blushing hot as the caravaners stared at him. He could see Baku and Coborn giggling together by the cooking pot, and wished he’d just left his mother to sleep in instead of starting all this stupid drama and embarrassing himself like an idiot. ‘It’s *nobody’s* business but mine!’

‘Is everything okay?’ Lif asked, sliding between him and Stars as if to protect her. ‘You’re acting... *weird*, man. Is something up?’

‘He’s in love with—’

‘NO!’ Ka’harja almost knocked Lif to the ground as he flew past him and slammed his hand over Stars’ mouth again. ‘NO!’

‘In love?’ Lif asked, frowning. ‘With *who?*’

There was a shout, and Naranako leapt around camp, clapping his hands and whooping. ‘I KNEW IT! I KNEW IT! I fucking *called it!*’

‘What’s going on?’ Distro asked, rounding the caravan with— Ka’harja almost choked when he saw Coff at her side.

And he knew everyone else saw Coff, too, because the caravan went silent.

Dead silent.

Except for Stars, who pulled away from Ka’harja and called out, ‘Coff! Are you gay?’

Coff stopped in his tracks and stared. ‘Wha— Why?’

Ka’harja made to cover her mouth again, but she dodged with surprising speed and rushed to the healer’s side.

‘Because Ka’harja is in love with you!’ she blurted. ‘But he’s too scared to say so in case you’re not gay and don’t love him back! So are you gay? And do you love Ka’harja back?’

Coff looked from Stars, to Ka’harja, to Stars, to Ka’harja, to the rest of the caravaners, to Distro’s shit-eating grin, back to Stars, and then back to Ka’harja.

And then he fainted.

# Chapter 24

## Somewhere Else; Okatako Merf 6<sup>th</sup>, Year 10,053 AE

Ka'harja felt like he was going to collapse.

He'd been running for... he wasn't sure how long. But the sky was turning orange in the distance and he could hear night-bugs starting their songs, and knew it had been a while.

Maybe it hadn't been the best idea, sprinting away from camp. But it was much better than having to face Coff and explain his feelings.

Why had Stars told him? Oh Great Star, now he could never go back!

Ka'harja let out a loud sigh as he looked around.

Not that he'd know how to get back. He was in the middle of nowhere, and could barely tell what direction he'd come from.

He wanted to lie down but the grass was damp and muddy, and he was already wet enough with sweat...

Though there was a large, flat rock in the distance. Maybe he could sit on that for a bit?

It was worth checking out.

Ka'harja made his way over to the rock and was relieved to see it was dry. After a quick moment to catch his breath, he hoisted himself onto its flat top and had another look around.

There was a gravel road not far off. It didn't look familiar, though. Definitely not the same path Sken's caravan had been following....

'Ugh.'

Whatever.

He'd deal with *that* later.

For now he was going to sleep.

He would just close his eyes to rest, and deal with life afterwards.

He felt himself dozing, and let himself... drift off....

'AY!'

The voice pulled him from his sleepy haze, and Ka'harja found he barely had the energy to open his eyes.

But why bother? Whoever it was probably wasn't talking to him, anyway....

'Ay! Ka'harja? Ka'harja!'

*That* got his attention, and he sat up and glanced around the dark field.

He saw a single caravan on the road, now, pulled by plain brown horses and steered by a familiar felinic woman who's name he couldn't seem to place in his exhausted state. But he recognised the bright orange curls shadowed in the light of the old lantern behind her and, even from a distance, he knew her dark skin was dotted with freckles. He knew her. He knew he knew her....

He wiped the sleep from his eyes.

*Where the hell was he?*

'Ka'harja, that chu?'

He nodded slowly.

'Gods above! Y'alive!' she turned and slammed a hand against the caravan's wall. 'Oi! Lads! Distro's boy's alive!'

Another familiar felinic poked his head out one of the caravan windows.

'Ah, *shit!*' he exclaimed. 'Thought ya'd burnt with ya house! What ya doing on a rock all th'way out 'ere?'

'I got lost,' Ka'harja admitted.

'I'll say!' the woman retorted. 'Y'mum 'right?'

'Yeah, she's fine,' he shrugged.

'We got ya mail!' the second felinic called.

'Our mail?' Ka'harja echoed.... Then, it hit him, and he couldn't believe he'd had trouble recognising them. 'Aunt Denni! Uncle Tayal!'

'Ahah! Y'*do* 'member me!' Denni let out a hearty laugh and motioned for Ka'harja to come closer. 'Thought ya'd forgotten me for a moment, there!'

'I think I did. Just for a moment, though,' Ka'harja couldn't hide his smile as he clambered up the side of the cart to join Denni at the reins. 'Is Werani here?'

'Yep, sleepin' in the back like a babe in a cradle!' Denni replied. 'S'prised I didn't wake 'im with m' banging on th'wall!'

'Or y'drivin!' Tayal cackled. 'I swear, y'get worse every day!'

'Oh-hoo! Y'ain't one t'talk, Tayal!' Denni retorted. Then she turned to Ka'harja and shrugged. 'Where's y'mum, hon? Gotta give 'er some stuff.'

'Uh, I'm not actually sure,' Ka'harja admitted. 'I wasn't joking before. I'm... lost.'

'Aw, hon—'

'I know where she *should* be, if they haven't left me behind,' Ka'harja pointed in a random direction. 'By the river.'

'River ain't that way, Sweetheart,' Denni corrected Ka'harja by pushing his fingers until he was pointed in the right direction. 'But nah, y'mum'll be waiting for ya. Sh'ain't th'sort to leave 'er boy b'hind!'

'Yeah,' Tayal scoffed. 'Do'ya 'member when 'e was sleepin' an' we tried t'get Distro t'leave 'im for th'night an' come driving with us?'

'HAH! I 'member 'er biting Dola over it!'

'Dola?' Ka'harja didn't remember that name.

‘E was m’old life partner,’ Tayal leant out of another window, resting his arms on the driver’s seat above Denni and shrugging. ‘Y’was only ten when ‘e passed. Y’only met ‘im... three times? Not s’prised ‘e ain’t in y’memories, y’forgetful li’l thing!’

‘Oh.’

‘Y’want a lift t’t’h’river?’ Denni asked.

‘That’d be helpful, yeah.’

‘Ah, that’s m’sis!’ Tayal ruffled Denni’s hair. Lookin’ out fer D’s kid like y’s still together!’

‘You— Wait, you *dated* my mum?’ Ka’harja felt like a rug had just been pulled out from under him. ‘I thought you were just friends!’

‘No? Ah’ve told y’b’fore ‘bout it. But.... Mm,’ Denni shrugged. ‘Guess y’memory’s even worse than I thought.... Y’mum took m’last name, if that’s a way t’put it for ya.’

Forget the rug. He’d just been catapulted across the field....

‘Though back then sh’was going by Talti,’ Denni chuckled. ‘Sh’was having a hard time with ‘er identity. Sure y’member *that*, at least?’

‘Y-Yeah. I think so.’

‘Yeah. Sh’changed it t’Saima when we split,’ Denni continued. ‘An’ Distro when sh’moved in here! Really, I think th’reason sh’s stopped changing an’ figured ‘erself out was ‘cuz’a you!’

‘Sh’always wanted a babe,’ Tayal cut in. ‘But sh’was too proud t’say so. I ‘member us showin’ up one day t’find y’wrapped up in bandages like a newborn in a swaddle! Y’was terrified of us then! I ‘member you cryin’ an’ hiding in y’sleepin’ bag thinkin’ we was gonna *eat* ya!’

‘Y’was a stressed little’un, that’s f’sure!’ Denni laughed.

‘I’m braver now,’ Ka’harja bragged.

‘Hah! Crock!’ Denni jabbed him in the side. ‘Y’never in y’life got lost without it bein’ in a panic! Y’ran away from somethin’ and I wanna know what it was!’

‘Uh...’ Ka’harja felt himself blush. ‘It... was a *he*.’

‘Ooh, an attractive he?’ Tayal asked.

Ka’harja nodded.

‘Wh’ happened?’

‘A friend told him I liked him and... I panicked. Bolted. Kept running. Felt stupid that I ran, then felt like I couldn’t go back so I ran some more.’

‘HAH!’ Denni laughed so hard she nearly fell from her seat. ‘Now *that’s* th’Ka’harja I know!’

‘What ‘chu gonna do when y’get back?’ Tayal asked. ‘E into ya?’

‘No,’ Ka’harja sighed. ‘He had a girlfriend.’

‘*Had* a girlfriend?’ Denni asked.

‘Yeah. He left her.’

‘S’what’s th’problem?’

‘He’s straight!’

‘Did ‘e say that?’ Tayal scoffed. ‘With words? Or are y’just bein’ stupid again?’

'Well, no he didn't *say* it—'  
'Then how y'know 'e's straight? If 'e left 'is girl 'e mustn't've liked 'er much!'  
'He...' Ka'harja couldn't argue with that. 'Uh...'  
'Plus, what's t'say 'e ain't bi?' Denni cackled. 'Just 'cos I fucked'cha ma don't mean I wouldn't have fucked y'da, too! Did y'consider 'e might dip in both bottles?'  
Ka'harja was so disgusted he almost missed her point. Almost.  
'Bi?' he managed.  
'Yeah.'  
'Bisexual?'  
'Yeah.'  
'Oh, Great Star. Bi.'  
'Y'forgot 'bout bi boys, eh?' Tayal slapped Ka'harja in the back of the head. 'Even after y'own uncle is one? Y'stupid little shit fer'brains!'  
'I'm not smart,' Ka'harja admitted.  
'Understatement of th'eclipse!' Denni laughed. 'Oh, Sweetheart, y'dumb as m'wooden leg!'  
'You have a wooden leg?' Ka'harja asked.  
'Oh moons,' Denni's face disappeared into her hands. 'I love ya. I do. But y'stupid, hon. Y'real fuckin' dumb.'  
'Yeah,' Ka'harja barely heard himself over Tayal's laughter. 'Again, not smart.'  
'Ah, I love ya, Sweetheart,' Denni wrapped an arm around Ka'harja and pulled him close. She gave him a kiss on the cheek before turning and smacking her brother. 'Ay, didn't 'e get a package from Distro's da?'  
'Ah yeah, old grumpy,' Tayal muttered, retreating back into the caravan. 'Right 'ere!'  
Ka'harja stared at the package that had suddenly appeared in his hands, processing that he was now holding something, before breaking the heavily-waxed seal and pulling out... socks.  
Shimmering silken socks with serpentine dragons running along rose-thorn vine patterning, sewn in the ugliest pastel colours Ka'harja could have possibly imagined.  
It was too much.  
'Ah.... S'okay if y'wanna cry,' Denni muttered. 'S'nothing t'be 'shamed of.'  
'I don't know if there's any tears left in me,' his voice quivered. 'I've cried so much lately...'  
A hand met his shoulder, and a tail entwined with his own, and he looked to his uncle and sniffed before sliding off his shoes and slipping the socks on.  
'Lookin' good, hon,' Denni commented.  
Ka'harja snickered and wiped his nose. 'You can be honest. They're ugly, aren't they?'  
'Nah, they're pretty,' Tayal laughed. 'Wolven shit's cute.'  
'Speakin' of pretty,' Denni grinned. 'Show 'im th'star!'  
'The star?' Ka'harja echoed.  
'TH'STAR!' Tayal gasped, retreating into the caravan again with several loud crashes before emerging with a large yellow rock.

'It's a r—' Ka'harja cut short. 'Is that... yellow soulstone? *Yellow!*'

'Y'got it!' Tayal exclaimed. 'I ain't never seen soulstone this colour b'fore! T'was in a big crater near y'house! 'Reckon it was one of them two stars that fell!'

'Couldn't find th'other one,' Denni snorted. 'Reckon it landed a bit away, an' got picked up by 'nother traveller.'

'Keepin' an eye out for it though!' Tayal grinned, holding the star out for Ka'harja to take. 'Pretty cool, eh?'

'Yeah...' Ka'harja felt mesmerised by the glowing yellow rock. It was... big. And heavy. And beautiful. 'You know, I saw it land.'

'Aw, lucky!' Tayal laughed. 'Hah! Well, t'was near ya place, so I ain't s'prised y'saw it.'

'Not lucky, it was like being hit by a stampeding herd of dragons,' he explained. 'I could barely get up, and when I finally did, the second one hit and threw me down again. I honestly thought I was going to die or something. And I could barely hear afterwards.... Wasn't lucky at all.'

'But was it pretty?' Denni asked.

Ka'harja thought back. 'Yes and no. It looked like....'

'Like what?'

'You know those murals you find in animon churches?' he asked. 'Of Higrunchi leaping into the sky and turning into the sun?'

'Shit.'

'Nah way!'

'Yeah way,' Ka'harja passed the glowing stone back to Tayal. 'I'd just stolen shit from a bunch of religious folk, too, and for a moment I actually thought—' he cut off in a giggle. '—I thought for a moment that their gods were coming to beat me up!'

'Oh, hon, sounds like y'got up t'a lot!' Denni wiped her eye. 'Anythin' else happen t'ya lately?'

'A goblin tried to kiss me.'

'A GOBLIN!' Tayal screeched out a cackle. 'TRIED T'KISS YA! HAH! BOY! Y'GOT ME! Y'GONNA KILL ME!'

'Yeah, I know, it was gross,' Ka'harja mock-gagged. 'She was nice and all, but I didn't want her anywhere near my face.'

Tayal kept laughing. So hard he slipped from the open caravan window and back into the caravan with a crash— And finally, Werani snorted awake and rolled out of bed.

'Ka'harja?' he asked, poking his head out the window and kissing Denni's cheek. 'What's 'e doin' 'ere?'

'Got lost,' Denni explained. 'On our way t'drop 'im off t'is mum.'

'Distro's alive?' Werani's face broke into a grin. 'Gods! S'great news! Thought th'poor thing'd burnt up!'

'Nah, sh'good!' Tayal chimed in. 'And Ka'harja got 'nother boyfriend.'

'I didn't—' Ka'harja felt himself blush as the felinics laughed. 'I *wish*.'

'Y'never know,' Werani gave his shoulder a friendly punch and sniffed. 'Might like y'back!'

'Well he knows I like him, so I guess I can only hope....'

'Y'know what'll calm y'nerves?' Tayal asked— And didn't wait for a response before passing Ka'harja a half-empty bottle. 'Alco-holic-ohol!'

'Hah! Sounds like y've had t'much, y'self!' Denni retorted.

Ka'harja wasn't sure he should drink.... After what Coff had said about his mother, and his depression, it seemed like a bad idea....

Though, he hadn't exactly made the best choices today. What was *one more* bad decision?

'Cheers,' he muttered, holding up the bottle before throwing his head back and downing it in one go. '*GODS!* What was that?'

'New stuff,' Tayal replied. 'Made by foxens in Quel'tua— Gots th'party of a foxen, an' th'self-control of an avio!'

'Flavour of th'Rendi,' Denni tapped the label with a beautifully painted nail. 'Th'name, ah'mean.'

Ka'harja turned the bottle over and checked it. She was right. *Flavour of the Rendi* was written in cursive that looked as drunk as a bottle of the stuff would probably make you.

'Want s'more?' Werani asked.

'I—'

'Course 'e does!' Tayal interrupted. "'E's Distro's boy!'

Ka'harja couldn't argue with that.

# Chapter 25

## On the Right Track; Near the River

Merf 6<sup>th</sup>, Year 10,053 AE

A sky of rainbow stars silhouetted the lone caravan as its horses trudged over the uneven field. Each bump sent the boy on top of the cart stumbling from one end to the other; his voice faltering, but his song not stopping, as he lost and found his balance over and over.

Ka'harja wasn't a bad singer —not really— and perhaps if he practised he could become decent, but backed by the screaming felinics below him it was impossible to make out his voice as anything besides a drunken shout.

The group had all but forgotten that they were supposed to be heading for the river. And it was by pure luck alone that the band of idiots happened to be going in the right direction.

'Oh lover!' Ka'harja sung. 'Dear lover!'

'DEAR LOVAH!'

'Dear lover! What are you now! My lover!'

'M'LOVAH!'

'My lover! A beast of green and black!'

'GREEN AN'BLACK!'

'A *beast* of green and black!'

'GREEN AN'BLACK!'

'And the Maiden said—'

'AN'TH'MAIDEN SAID!'

'—*SPARE ME!*' Ka'harja cried, raising his hands above his head and addressing the sky. 'Oh dear lover! Spare me!'

'SPARE ME—'

'SPARE MY LIFE!'

'SPARE ME—'

'OH *DEAR LOVER*—' Ka'harja cut off as he lurched sideways and fell off the caravan. '*FUCK ME!*'

'THOSE AIN'T TH'LYRICS!' an indignant cry called.

'I FELL!' Ka'harja exclaimed. 'STOP THE CARAVAN! I BROKE MY

EVERYTHING!

'Y'fine!' Denni called back, tugging the horses to a stop. 'Get back in y'place on th'roof so we can keep moving!'

'But Auntie!' Ka'harja whined. 'I broke my everything!'

'Y'broke y'nothin'!

'I did *too* break my—'

'BY THE MOONS!' a new voice joined the group, and Baku appeared over a hill. 'Ka'harja! Oh, moons! I thought we'd lost you!'

'Hey *party boy!*' Ka'harja called, rolling in a circle and flattening the grass around him. 'Did you miss me?'

'This y'boyfriend?' Denni cackled. 'What a *twunk!*'

'No, no!' Ka'harja pushed himself to his feet, stumbling a few steps before catching himself. 'This isn't my boyfriend! This is *Baku!* Baku is *Koko's* boyfriend! And *Koko's* a *bitch!* I wouldn't steal her boyfriend, she'd *beat me up!*'

'Ah. You're drunk,' Baku sighed, wiping the sweat from his brow and pushing back his messy hair. 'At least you found people.'

'Not *people!*' Ka'harja snapped. '*Family!*'

'FAMILY!' the felinics all cried.

'FAMILY!' Ka'harja repeated, collapsing at Baku's feet and staring, intensely, into the man's eyes as tears came to his own. 'They're my... my family, Baku.'

'They're felinic,' Baku retorted.

'She fucked my mum!' Ka'harja exclaimed. 'I didn't know that! I thought she was my aunt! But she *fucked* my *mum*, Baku!'

'*Oooh-kay,*' Baku let out a heavy breath and looked around. 'You sound like you need to lie down.'

'I need— I need to—' he threw up instead of finishing his sentence.

'SKEN!' Baku shouted over the felinics' laughter. 'SKEN! I FOUND KA'HARJA!'

'Wait, *Sken?*' Werani's laughter quieted down and he wiped his nose on his wrist. 'Lyzik?'

Baku twitched an ear. 'Yeah?'

'Hah! By th'moons, Ka! Y'met little Lyzik?!' Tayal exclaimed. 'OI! OI SKEN! S'US!'

'YOU KNOW SKEN?' Ka'harja exclaimed.

'Yeah!' Denni cackled. 'W'used to run in th'same circles! Sh'was a little brat last w'saw her!'

'Been years!' exclaimed Werani. 'Sh'was what? Pushin' fifteen when w'knew'er?'

'Yeah, yeah, sh'was hanging with th'Sapious caravan!' Tayal chuckled. 'Weren't that guy Raoul lookin' after'er for'er mum?'

'Raoul!' Ka'harja exclaimed. 'Oh, she does *not* like him!'

'Why, wha'did'e do?' Denni snorted. Then she fell silent as her eyes met something ahead and her smile fell from her face. 'Aw, no. Hon. *No.*'

Ka'harja turned and saw Sken coming up the hill, her tail twitching as she locked eyes with the felinics.

A hush fell over the boisterous group as she made her way down the incline and pulled Ka'harja to his feet, and the man felt the awkward silence stretching over the grassy fields like a heavy blanket.

'Sken?' he said slowly.

'*What?*' her voice was barely a whisper as she refused to look away from the distant horizon.

'This is my aunt, Denni,' he motioned to the cart. 'And my uncles. Tayal and Werani.'

Sken eyed him for a second before turning away again. 'I know their names.'

'Lyzik, love?' Denni's voice floated down from the caravan, as sweet as the time Ka'harja had come home with skinned knees and teary eyes. 'What happened t'ya?'

Sken scoffed. 'Remember Raoul?'

'Yeah?'

'I was dating him.'

'Aw, *no*. Hon! 'E was t'old for ya,' Denni sighed. 'Aw, love....'

'I know that *now*,' Sken muttered.

'We would'a helped'cha if—'

'I know. Obviously. That's why he told me not to tell you we were together.'

'Hon—'

'I have a wife now,' Sken's tone shifted, and a smile found its way to her lips. It was weak, but it was genuine, and she stood a little straighter as she continued. 'And I'm over Raoul. And I am also *not* surprised the first time I see you ratty little scammers in— What is it? *Ten years?* Is because you've picked up this good-for-nothing dumb-shit.'

Ka'harja looked to the ground and coughed as Sken slapped him on the back.

'I'm glad you're safe, you moron,' Sken sighed. She flicked her tail before looking up at the felinics. 'You're Ka'harja's aunt? Really? I'm guessing Distro is on that ex-wife's side of the family, then?'

Denni let out a laugh. 'Ah, right! Right. Y'never actually met Saima, did ya? Sh'left our group right b'fore we met, didn't she?'

Sken gave shrug. Then a nod. Then another shrug.

'Saima is Distro,' Denni explained. 'Sh'changed her name.'

'You're fucking joking!' Sken snapped. 'Oh, *fuck* you! Fuck all of you!'

The felinics let out a chorus of cackles as Sken stomped a foot.

'You're telling me Distro is your fucking ex-wife?!' Sken's gills let out a frustrated squeal. 'You're telling me— You're telling me that I've been dragging around one of you garbage-eating sticky-fingered scammers for a whole *month?!?*'

'Yeah!' Denni beamed. 'Ah shit, though. Can't believe y'met up on y'own like this! Small world, huh? We were hopin' t'see her, actually. If y'wouldn't mind it.'

'Of course you were,' Sken gave an exaggerated shrug. 'Well, if you're here you might as well stay the night. We have a fire-pit already set up and your horses look like they could use a good brush. Our caretaker would probably love to see them.'

'Well, I ain't gonna argue w'my horses being spoilt!' Denni cackled. 'Joinin' y'would be an honour, hon! An' I'll keep m'hands in m'pockets this time, huh? Nothing'll go missing. Promise!'

‘At least nothin’ important,’ Tayal joked.  
Sken just rolled her eyes.  
‘I’ll go let Krarf know about the horses,’ Baku mumbled, hurrying away.  
‘Who’s Krarf?’ Ka’harja sniffed.  
‘You know Krarf,’ Sken sighed.  
‘Krarf.... That name is very familiar.’  
‘By the Goddess, Ka’harja,’ Sken put her face in her hands. ‘The animal caretaker, Krarf? Short? Bearded? Quiet?’  
‘He feeds the dragons!’ the memory of Krarf shot back to Ka’harja and he nearly fell over again. ‘I think.... I think he doesn’t like me very much.’  
‘No, he does *not*,’ Sken confirmed, shoving Ka’harja in the direction of camp. ‘To be fair, though, he doesn’t like many people. But he does his job.... Now, get moving. Everyone is worried sick about you.’  
‘Sick...’ Ka’harja muttered. ‘If they’re sick they should see a healer. Coff is a healer. Coff.... Coff.... OH, COFF!’  
He turned to sprint away, but met Sken’s outstretched arm instead and crumpled to the ground.  
‘We’re not wasting any more time chasing you down,’ she muttered, gripping him by the shirt and yanking him to his feet. ‘You’re going to face Coff like a man and deal with this shit.’  
‘But— But foxen men are *cowards*!’ Ka’harja exclaimed, trying to wiggle out of his shirt but wincing as his ear was given a warning tug. ‘We’re known for it!’  
‘Not in my caravan, you’re not,’ Sken scolded. ‘Besides, your mother’s been worried. You don’t want to make your mother worried, do you?’  
‘No,’ Ka’harja admitted, letting himself be defeated. ‘I love my mother.’  
‘I love y’mother too,’ Denni mumbled from somewhere behind the pair.  
‘We’re just over the hill,’ Sken’s voice softened, and she let Ka’harja’s shirt go— Though her arm remained firmly around his shoulders. ‘Come on, you idiot.’  
Ka’harja pouted as he was led back to camp. Almost everyone had gathered to greet him, obviously alerted by Baku.... He felt guilty when he saw his mother pacing anxiously with Dena at her side, and gave a half-wave as she paused to look at him.  
‘You little shit!’ she exclaimed, marching over to throw her arms around him and bury her face into his hip. ‘I can’t believe you! I thought I’d lost you! Don’t you *ever* run away like that again!’  
‘Sorry,’ Ka’harja managed. He shuffled in place for a moment before giving a cough and motioning behind himself. ‘I found Aunt Denni.’  
‘You wha— DENNI!’ Distro gasped, her face lighting up in a wide, draconic grin.  
‘WHOA! DISTRO! Y’GOT UGLY!’ Tayal’s laugh was immediately followed by shouting as Denni yanked him out of the caravan and threw him to the ground.  
‘Y’beautiful,’ Denni corrected. ‘Y’look cute w’horns!’  
‘They’re more like stubs,’ Distro snorted, poking one of the four little white bumps on her head. ‘But yeah, you could say they’re *growing* on me!’  
‘Ah’m gonna fuckin’ kill ya,’ Denni replied. ‘Ay! I got ya mail!’  
‘Oh!’ Distro clapped her hands together and rushed past her son so she could clamber to her ex’s side. ‘From my father?’

'Yeah! From y'da!' Werani stuck his head out of the caravan and handed Distro a handful of letters. 'Think 'e still hates us. But's nothin' new there.'

'Nah, he loves you,' Distro cooed, pinching the felinic's cheek and sticking out her tongue. 'He's just too *cultured* to know it.'

The felinics laughed, and Ka'harja heard a sigh from his side.

Dena looked lonely and uncomfortable as Distro chatted with her old friends, and Ka'harja couldn't help feeling bad for her. He wondered if he should introduce them— But was beaten to it as his mother practically leapt from her seat and grabbed Dena by the arm.

'This is Dena!' she exclaimed. 'We need to make her a Caves and Creatures character, *right now*.'

'YES!' Tayal shouted, yanking open the caravan's door and ushering the two women inside. 'W'GOT OUR THIEF BACK! W'CAN GO T'STORM MOUNTAIN AND BEAT TH'OGRE!'

'Gods they're loud,' Sken muttered. Then she turned to Ka'harja with a grin. 'I can see where you get it from.'

Ka'harja gave a nervous shrug. 'Well, I mean.... Yeah.'

'Coff's waiting for you,' said Sken, motioning to the healer's caravan. 'You should talk to him.'

'Do I have to?'

'Yes,' Sken replied. 'For his sake. Please, just talk to him before he stresses himself into some sort of attack.'

Ka'harja let out a loud groan and trudged past the rest of the caravaners to Coff's door. He stood for a second before glancing back to Sken, who gave a firm nod. When she did, he sighed and knocked on the door.

He heard a crash and a panicked exclamation in response and almost bolted again. But he swallowed his anxiety as the door slowly opened.

'Ka'harja?'

'Yeah,' Ka'harja cleared his throat as he avoided the healer's eye. 'We should probably... talk.'

Coff simply stood aside and motioned for Ka'harja to join him in the caravan.

Reluctantly, Ka'harja did, and sat on his mother's bed as Coff sat in his chair at his desk. He stared at Ka'harja, who slowly gave a nod.

'So....'

'S-So,' Coff echoed. 'Ka'harja, I-I....'

Ka'harja waited patiently for Coff to finish, but when the man didn't, he simply sighed and looked to the floor. 'I know you like Stars.'

'Wh-What? Why would I... W-We h-have nothing in-in c-common!' Coff gasped. 'I don't— I d-don't l-like her!'

'Wait, you *don't* like Stars?' Ka'harja asked. 'Then who's the crush you were talking about?'

Coff stared at him for a long, long moment. The look on his face told Ka'harja that he *should* have known, but in the state he was in he... couldn't quite figure it out.

After a minute that felt like an hour, he decided to guess. 'You like... *Sken*?'

'*NO!*' Coff exclaimed, burying his face in his hands. 'Y-Y-You're so— So st-st-

stup-stup-stupid— H— How— How are you— Even— Even—’

Ka’harja wasn’t sure what to do as Coff doubled over with a frustrated cry, so he awkwardly leant over and pet the healer on the back. ‘I’m sorry. Does it really matter that I know? I mean— I’d probably end up telling them by accident....’

Coff took a deep breath and sat up straight. He stared at Ka’harja again, his eyes wide. And, after a minute, he spoke.

Slowly.

‘Ka’harja?’

‘Yeah?’

‘I like... *you*.’

‘As a friend?’

The healer struck him across the cheek so hard he slipped off the bed and onto the floor. His head was spinning as he scrambled to sit back up.

*What— What other kind of like was there besides—*

‘Oh Great Star you *like* like me!’ Ka’harja exclaimed.

Coff closed his eyes and let out a long breath, as if a weight had been lifted off him. He nodded as he took another deep breath in. ‘Yes.’

‘You *like* like me,’ Ka’harja repeated.

‘Yes.’

‘Like, *like* like me?’

‘Yes.’

‘Like— You— You like, *like* like me.’

Coff buried his face in his hands. ‘G-Goddess knows *why*.’

Ka’harja couldn’t comprehend it.

Coff liked him?

Coff... *like* liked him.

‘D-Do you l-like me back?’ Coff asked. ‘Or was St-Stars....’

Ka’harja wasn’t sure what to say. But he knew he should say something— But what? What should he say?

‘Uh.... I’m going to give you a foot rub!’ Ka’harja decided, leaping to his feet and lifting Coff into the air.

‘Wh-What!’ Coff exclaimed as he was dropped onto his bed.

‘We’re boyfriends now,’ Ka’harja managed. ‘So I’m going to give you a foot rub.’

‘Um...’ Coff’s eyes darted around the room. ‘A-Are you... d-drunk?’

‘I’m not drunk, I’m your boyfriend!’ Ka’harja replied, flopping heavily next to Coff and pulling his feet onto his lap. ‘And I want to be a good boyfriend so I’m going to— Great Star, it’s *gone!*’

‘Wh-What’s g-gone?’

‘Your foot! Your foot is gone!’ Ka’harja stared down at Coff’s footless ankle with wide eyes. ‘Where’d it go?!’

‘I-I was— I was b-born l-like th-this. You— You d-didn’t no-noti...’ Coff trailed off with a sigh. ‘Of-Of *c-course* you d-didn’t n-notice....’

Ka’harja felt tears coming to his eyes. ‘But... but how can I.... How can I give you a feet rub if you don’t have *feet?*’

'Pl-Please don't c-cry,' Coff muttered, shifting around awkwardly until he was sitting with his head on Ka'harja's shoulder and his arm around his back. He lifted his other leg and showed off his bare foot. 'I st-still h-have o-one f-foot. J-Just do— Just do th-that one tw-twice? And— And d-don't st-start crying. Pl-please don't....'

It was too late. Tears streamed down Ka'harja's cheeks as he wrapped his arms around the healer and squeezed him tightly. 'I'm so sorry I didn't notice! I'm a bad boyfriend!'

'N-No?'

'*I am!*'

'Y-You're not— *W-We're* not? A-Are we?'

'*I love you,*' Ka'harja sobbed. 'I love you, and I'm sorry.'

'You— Um...'  
Coff looked around the room anxiously, his eyes settling on the door with a desperate look in them. 'Sh-Should we— Distro? Y-Your mother. Do you w-want me to g-get h-her or...'

'I want to sleep,' Ka'harja sniffed.

'O-Okay,' Coff nodded. 'G-Good idea. Sl-Sleep. And we— We will talk about this wh-when you're s-sober.'

# Chapter 26

## Hangin' Halfway Out of Bed; Coff's Caravan Merf 7<sup>th</sup>, Year 10,053 AE

*Eighth child of the Ninth*, he was hung over.

Ka'harja took a deep breath and tried to open his eyes. Everything was *far* too bright for his liking and he struggled to focus his vision.

What had he done last night? He couldn't remember a thing.

The taste of an unfamiliar alcohol hung on his breath and he groaned. Had his mother had his aunt over?

No. No. This wasn't his house.... This was Coff's caravan.

He groaned again.

He had to get up.

Gods, he didn't want to. But he had to. He was starving, and he couldn't see his mother anywhere. She still wasn't supposed to be out of bed for too long, and she was probably running around camp, kicking more logs and wearing herself out.

He took a deep breath and smelt breakfast cooking on the air. It smelt *so good*.

Great Star, he felt like he hadn't eaten in days! Had he missed dinner?

It felt like he'd missed dinner.

And breakfast was out there, waiting for him....

That was enough to motivate him into ignoring his pounding headache. He pushed himself to his feet and stumbled into the caravan door, where he stayed for a moment before finally opening it and, legs trembling, made his way through camp to the fire pit.

He swore everyone was staring at him as they sat with their meals. He must have looked as hung over as he felt as he stood, swaying, in front of Coborn.

He wasn't sure why she was snickering.

Nor was he sure why Coff was looking at him the way he was from her side.

'Hi,' Ka'harja managed, his voice as raspy as his mother's used to be.

'H-Hi,' Coff responded. 'Abou-About l-last night....'

*Last night?* Ka'harja could feel himself squinting as he tried to remember what happened last night.

*Oh!*

‘Oh— What Stars said!’ Ka’harja blurted. ‘Uh— She was— She was wrong. Mistaken. I think she misheard me or something.’

Coff just stared as Coborn’s snicker turned into a cackle and she spilt the bowl of half-served oats on the ground.

‘Or is that not what you’re talking about?’

‘N.... No,’ Coff muttered. ‘I— I mean.... A-After th-that.’

After that?

‘What happened after that?’

‘Y-You don’t remem-remember?’

‘Uh...’ was he supposed to? Had something important happened or— He let out a shriek and leapt backwards, tripping over his own feet and ending up on the ground as the entire night came flooding back to him. ‘YOU LIKE ME BACK!’

‘*There we go,*’ Coborn swallowed her laugh as Coff shook his head.

‘You- You r-really forg-forgot?’

‘Apparently?’

‘G-Goddess,’ Coff put his face in his hands and let out a long, deep sigh.

‘Are we dating now?’ Ka’harja blurted.

Coff didn’t look up, and instead let out another sigh.

‘So, uh.... Is that a no?’

‘N-Not a n-no,’ Coff managed, running his hands through his short, messy hair and sitting up straight, finally looking over to Ka’harja. ‘But— Not a y-yes. N-Not y-yet.’

‘Why not yet?’ cocking his head, Ka’harja tried to piece together what the problem was. If they liked each other, why not be together?

‘Because you’re as dumb as a brick,’ Felelor’s hand made contact with Ka’harja’s back, and Ka’harja almost shrieked again in surprise. ‘And you wouldn’t know a boundary if you ran face-first into a sign that said “no entry.”’

‘Right,’ Ka’harja glanced to Coff, who gave a slow nod. ‘I’m too dumb for you.’

‘N-No!’ Coff shook his head. ‘I-It’s ch-char-charming. You are. M-Most of the t-time. B-But.... I.... We.... Need to t-talk about it.’

‘Privately,’ Coborn added.

Ka’harja nodded, and got to his feet. ‘Okay.... Now?’

‘E-Eat first,’ Coff took the bowl of food from Coborn and offered it to Ka’harja— It was devoured in moments. ‘I.... That was f-fast.’

‘I was hungry,’ Ka’harja said, simply. ‘And... if you want to talk....’

‘Uh...’ Coff rubbed the back of his neck. ‘M-Maybe a-after....’

‘After what?’

Coff glanced to the out-of-place caravan at the edge of camp and sighed. ‘Distro.’

‘Shit, right,’ Felelor put a hand to his mouth, his grin disappearing into a solemn look. ‘Yeah. You might want to go talk to her.’

Ka’harja didn’t even think to ask why as he leapt to his feet and ran to Denni’s caravan. The way Felelor had looked at him, he knew something was wrong. He burst into the caravan, ignoring Tayal’s terrified shout, and glanced around for his mother.

She stared at him from her place in Dena’s arms; her eyes red and sore but her

expression otherwise calm as she wiped her nose.

‘Dramatic,’ she snorted, the sides of her snout twitching as if she was trying to smile.

‘Are you okay?’ Ka’harja blurted. ‘Have you been crying? Why— What happened?’

Distro gave a loud sniff and sat up. She pet the bed beside her, and when Ka’harja sat down she put her head on his arm and sighed, ‘My mother’s sick. L... Laseen. Dad’s wife.’

‘Grandma?’ Ka’harja managed. ‘What’s she sick with? I-Is it bad?’

‘She was drugged,’ Distro muttered. ‘With *chino flore*.’

‘The pain poison?’ Ka’harja let out a gasp. ‘What— Is she okay?’

‘She’ll live,’ Distro sighed, fiddling with the wrinkled letter in her hands and picking at the already-frayed corner with worry. ‘But she’s not well.... She.... She was in so much pain that she....’

Werani’s hand met Ka’harja’s shoulder. ‘Sh’ripped out ‘er own stomach.’

‘*Eighth child...*’ Ka’harja felt like he was shrinking —like hands of horrible feelings were crushing him like a ball of paper— and it took too much effort just to swallow. ‘When?’

‘Two months before we lost our house,’ Distro took a deep breath and composed herself. ‘And that’s not the only bad news— My brother was almost hit by a speeding cart, and your cousin fell off a balcony. Nobody’s died but... I guess it’s just been a string of bad luck for the family.’

‘Y’all still ‘live though,’ Denni sighed. ‘Ain’t much comfort, but y’all are still ‘live.’

Distro nodded, and let out the rest of her breath in a long sigh. ‘Did you talk to Coff?’

‘I don’t think that’s important right now—’

‘Nonsense,’ interrupting her son, Distro waved a hand. ‘I want to hear something *good* for once.’

‘Well... he says he likes me. But that he wants to talk about it,’ Ka’harja sighed. ‘Privately. Later.’

‘Ah,’ Tayal eased out of his chair so he could join Werani in patting Ka’harja’s back. ‘Better than a no. Prob’bly just wants t’tell y’somethin’ ‘portant. Like ‘e don’t like being t’cuddly or somethin’.’

‘Hah, yeah,’ Ka’harja brushed the felinic’s hand off his back and turned so he could lean against the wall. ‘You guys have fun with your game last night?’

‘Yeah, Dena’s a surprisingly good ranger,’ Distro gave a grunt and flopped against the nurlak, who scoffed but didn’t push her away. ‘Finally managed to get past that damn ogre and beat the campaign. It’s only taken *three years* to kill that damn thing!’

‘To be fair, that’s only six sessions.’

‘*To be fair*, they’re *ten hour* sessions!’ Distro retorted, kicking out her foot into her son’s face. ‘You should play with us.’

‘You know I can’t focus that long,’ he replied. ‘Maybe if you did... I don’t know, ten *minute* sessions, I’d be able to get through them.’

‘Ten minute sessions? What, you want to meet *one* person and then stop

playing?’

‘I mean, yeah. I hate meeting people. Even fake people.’

‘Well, I think—’

‘C’mon, Distro, y’ain’t much better!’ Tayal interrupted, earning a laugh from his sister.

‘Yeah, yeah!’ Denni cackled. ‘I ‘member when y’used t’hide in th’back of th’cart whenever there was a knock on th’door!’

‘What do you mean “used to?”’ Distro snorted. ‘You think I ever started answering my door? I moved to Okatako for a fucking reason, didn’t I! Honestly, sometimes it feels like I have the social skills of a slug.’

‘Ooh, self-burn,’ Werani teased. Then he nudged Ka’harja. ‘Y’really gonna let someone talk ‘bout y’mum like that, boy?’

‘Yeah!’ Tayal chimed. ‘If someone said that ‘bout m’own mother I’d give ‘em a good deckin’!’

‘I mean, she said it about herself—’

‘No ‘scuses! D’fend y’mum!’ Denni exclaimed, poking Ka’harja in the shoulder. ‘Give th’mean old lady a good slap!’

‘Old!’ Distro scoffed. ‘I’m not old!’

‘And I’m not slapping her!’ said Ka’harja.

‘Aw, what? You’re too much of a sook?’ Distro grinned. ‘I knew it. I raised a wimp.’

‘What, you *want* me to hit you?’ Ka’harja looked from his mother to the cheering felinics. ‘I’m not— Why— What’s wrong with you all?!’

‘Ah, I knew it, e’s a wimp!’

‘WIMP!’

‘Big baby.’

‘Hey— No, no!’ Ka’harja leapt to his feet and raised his hands defensively. ‘You guys can’t just bully me like this!’

‘Crock!’ Distro gave a wicked grin and made to stand. ‘We can *absolutely* bully you!’

‘*NO!*’ Ka’harja didn’t mean for it to come out as a shriek, but the entire room had taken cue from his mother and suddenly advanced on him— And he was only half out the door before he felt his mother leap onto his back and whoop like she was taming a wild horse. He nearly slipped down the last step as her weight slammed into him and stumbled along the damp grass for a minute before Distro’s arms wrapped around his face and he couldn’t see where he was going.

‘Git ‘im, Distro!’

‘No! Stop getting me!’ Ka’harja exclaimed. Then he tripped and fell, the weight on his back pulling him down sideways.

‘Aw, FUCK!’ Distro exclaimed as Ka’harja landed on her. ‘Elbow— ELBOW!’

Ka’harja rolled off her and she let out a gasp, gripping her stomach and rolling over to catch her breath.

‘Y’kay, Distro?’ Denni called.

‘Yeah, fine,’ Distro replied.

‘Serves you right,’ Ka’harja joked, rolling to his feet and offering his mother a

hand. 'I'm a *sensitive* boy, you know!'

Right as he said it he met eyes with Coff, and felt like an idiot. But then Coff smiled and he felt a little *less* like an idiot.... And then his mother yanked him onto the ground again and started sticking her fingers in his ears, and the shriek he let out made him feel stupider than ever.

'Let me go!' he cried. 'I'm fragile! I'M FRAGILE!'

'Crock!' Distro retorted before making a throaty snort— And Ka'harja screamed as spit made its way down the back of his neck.

'*DISGUSTING!*' his voice rose so high he was sure it carried all the way to Heck'ne. 'YOU'RE *DISGUSTING!*'

'You're the one with spit on you.'

'Get off me!' wiggling as much as he could, Ka'harja managed to knock his mother off his back and fled through the caravans towards the river.

He couldn't hear anyone following him as he made it to the incline and dared to slow down. Then he glanced back and was relieved to see nobody behind him.

'Oh, thank the Eighth child of the Ninth,' he breathed, starting down the hill. Then he slipped and tumbled the whole way down before splashing into the water with another loud cry.

He flailed for a moment before something heavy knocked the wind out of him. In the second it took him to compose himself, something grabbed him and flipped him upright, pushing him up and out of the river again.

'Scara, Ka'harja, are you *trying* to drown yourself?!' Sken's voice snapped. 'Stop struggling!'

'Sken?' Ka'harja managed as he was hefted out of the water and dropped heavily on the muddy bank by— *Oh, gods!* By an almost completely *naked* Sken! 'I-I'm gay!'

'Yes, I know that,' Sken grunted, dropping on the bank next to Ka'harja and rubbing her cheek. 'You also have a real good kick in you.'

'I kicked you?' cogs turning in his head, it took Ka'harja a moment to realise exactly what had just happened. 'Oh, oh Great Star I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to—'

'Yeah, yeah, I know,' Sken cut Ka'harja off with a humoured snort. 'You *never* mean to freak out. What happened this time?'

'Mum spat on me,' Ka'harja explained, making the mistake of glancing over himself and the secas. 'Uh. Your underwear.'

'What about my underwear?'

'I can see it?'

'Well, yeah,' Sken snorted. 'Can't exactly swim properly in jeans.'

'Ah. I see,' he gave a short nod. 'They're, uh, pink?'

'Yes.'

'I didn't think you'd like pink much,' Ka'harja admitted. 'I thought you'd be more of a... a purple girl.'

'Ugh, purple,' Sken rolled her eyes. 'My school uniform was purple. It was a horrible, ugly shade of the colour, too.'

'You went to school?'

'Had to get smarter than you somehow, didn't I?' Sken grinned before leaning

back and letting out a long, heavy sigh. 'I used to hate pink. It's what I was assigned at birth, you know.'

'You were assigned a colour?'

'Yeah, all secas are. Makes up for not being given a gender, I guess,' Sken's gills gave a pop and she grinned widely. 'Though, a secas' colour is meant to be a private thing and we're only meant to tell people we're close to. I never really bought into that whole shtick. Not really.... *Anyway*, you all done drowning?'

'Pretty sure I'm done,' Ka'harja felt himself chuckling as Sken punched him in the shoulder and pushed herself up. He watched as she disappeared back into the river and... wasn't entirely sure what to do next. He didn't want to go back to his mother. Not if she was going to spit on him again. And he wasn't sure Coff was ready to talk to him yet.

Though it was all he wanted to do.

But Coff had seemed determined to have a bit more time before talking about it. And after Felelor's comment about "boundaries" it was probably best not to push.

So instead of heading back to camp, he simply lay back in the grass, letting himself sun a little in hopes of drying off, and sighed loudly.

What was he doing wrong?

It always seemed to be *him*. Was he really that bad a person to know?

Gods, why was he like this?

Why why *why* couldn't he just be a *normal person* and not act like an idiot *constantly*?

'Ka'harja?'

He didn't mean to scream, but he leapt forward and let out a cry so loud that Sken resurfaced just as he went under.

'Scara's sake,' she huffed, lifting him back onto land. 'I thought you said you were *done* with drowning! Look at— You scared Coff!'

Ka'harja flinched as Sken smacked him over the head, then turned to see the healer collapsed on the bank.

'Is he— Coff? Are you okay?!' Ka'harja scrambled over to the unconscious man and lifted his head just as his eyes began to flutter back open. 'I'm so sorry!'

Coff just groaned and furrowed his brow.

'Coff, you alright?' Sken asked as she crouched next to the boys. She put a hand on his forehead and gently pet his hair back. 'You need help getting back to your caravan?'

'I— No,' he managed to sit up, with a little help. 'I j-just.... Wanted... to talk.'

'To Ka'harja?'

'Y-Y-Y—' he cut off, and nodded instead.

'Ah,' Sken glanced awkwardly between the boys. 'Did you two figure yourselves out yet, or should I leave?'

'Priv— I— Privately,' Coff managed.

'Okay,' Sken pet him again, almost as awkwardly as when Ka'harja had pet Annanyn the day before, then turned and slid back into the river. 'If you need me... just throw Ka'harja back in.'

'Hey!' he wasn't sure Sken heard his complaint as she disappeared back under

the water. A quiet moment passed as the ripples slowly faded, before he felt Coff put a hand on his. 'Coff? You okay?'

'I-I'm o-o-okay,' Coff managed. 'I w-want t-to.... To talk.'

'About... us?'

'Y-Yeah,' a deep blush spread over Coff's cheeks and he looked away. 'I... I like you.'

'As a friend?' Ka'harja joked. He nudged Coff when he rolled his eyes, and finally got a smile out of the man. 'So.'

'S-So....'

'Is it something I did?' Ka'harja blurted. 'I mean— Why you don't want to date me.'

'N-No! I w-w-w-want t-to d-date you,' Coff managed, finally meeting Ka'harja's gaze. 'It's— It's j-just h-hard. And— And i-it's not— It's n-not y-you.'

'That's not something I hear often,' Ka'harja was the one who looked away this time. 'Usually it's me.'

'No,' Coff said, his tone surprisingly firm. 'You. You are— You're w-wonderful. It's— It's T-Tisimi.'

'Who?'

'My e-ex g-g-girlf-friend,' Coff clarified. He shook his head and swallowed before pulling his knees against his chest and speaking quietly, '*I'm j-just. So— So s-scared.*'

Ka'harja understood what that felt like.

He really, truly understood.

How could he tell that to Coff, though? About all those years that he'd spent terrified of Kay'oten coming to find him.... It didn't seem comparable. But then, even after seeing her again and knowing that she was gone for good— The fear still hadn't gone away. Not really. And it was the same sort of fear, wasn't it?

*Deep breath*, Ka'harja thought. He just needed to put it into words. It was simple. *I understand.*

That was all he needed to say. Two words.

*I understand.*

Okay....

'Yeah, that sounds like absolute shit. I hope she falls out a window or something.'

He wanted to kill himself.

At least Coff seemed to think it was funny. He laughed for a moment, choking a little on his own giggles as he managed to add, 'M-Me t-too!'

'I didn't mean to say that,' Ka'harja admitted. 'Words are just. Hard. I meant to say.... I'm scared too.'

'Y-You a-are?' Coff's smile shrunk, and he edged closer. 'Of— Of what?'

'My mother,' a sigh escaped him, but he was relieved to feel Coff's head rest against his shoulder. 'Not Distro. Kay'oten. I know she's dead and can never come back or hurt me again but— But I'm still terrified of her. Just the *idea* of her makes me feel sick.'

'I-I under-understand,' Coff comforted.

'Yeah,' Ka'harja could feel the blood pumping in his ears as Coff's hand rested on his knee. 'I... hate knowing that you're scared. And I want to make you feel safe. Like my mum made me feel safe— Only— Only not like that. Like, different to that. I don't want to be your dad.'

Coff could hardly speak through his snickers as he sniffed and shook his head. 'I-I-I knew wh-what y-y-you m-meant! D-Don't m-make it-it weird!'

'No— I'm trying to make it the *opposite* of weird!' Ka'harja defended. 'Like, I don't want you calling me "daddy" or anything— Hey no, c'mon! Don't laugh at that! Coff— Coff!'

The healer couldn't seem to stop. He laughed, and laughed, and then tears fell down his cheeks and he didn't bother to wipe them away as he tried to catch his breath, only to glance up at Ka'harja and then laugh even more.

'Come on, Coff!' Ka'harja whined, trying to bite away his grin. 'You're the one who wanted to talk boundaries!'

Coff nodded and took a deep breath, finally managing to calm himself down. 'Y-Yes. I— I was. Sorry. It's j-just— Y-You dig h-holes. Sometimes— Sometimes you sh-should ju-just s-stop talking inst-instead of— Of—'

'Rambling?' Ka'harja felt himself grin. 'Yeah, no. I know. I can't really help it. I get nervous and it just comes out.'

Coff bit his lip, his cheeks a darkening red as he held back another laughing fit.

'What?'

'*Of the closet,*' it sounded more like a squeak than actual words. And it took a moment to sink in.... But when it did, Ka'harja almost launched himself into the river again.

He wasn't sure why it was funny. It barely made sense. But it made him giggle. 'This is not how I thought this conversation was going to go,' he admitted. 'I thought it was going to be a *lot* more serious!'

'I m-meant it t-to b-be,' Coff replied. 'I d-don't know wh-what happened. I just — I just feel b-better when you're around.'

'That's nice to hear,' he knew he was blushing as Coff moved closer, pressing into his side and squeezing his hand. 'You make me feel better, too. Like I'm not just an annoying burden with no friends.'

'You're— You're not a-a bur-burden,' Coff's hand squeezed tighter, and Ka'harja squeezed back. 'And.... You.... You h-have fr-friends.'

'You think?'

'Y-Yeah,' Coff looked up at Ka'harja, and offered him a nervous —but very genuine— smile. 'Y-You have m-m-me. A-And Stars. An-And Baku. C-Coborn r-really li-likes you, t-too.'

'Really? I got the feeling she found me frustrating.'

'Sh-She does.'

'Ah,' a half-laugh escaped Ka'harja as he dared to grin back. 'I see.... What're your thoughts on Koko? You think she likes me?'

Coff bit his lip and looked away, raising a brow. '*Mmm....* I-I don-don't know. I can— I can never tell w-with h-her. She— She likes you mor-more than she l-likes Co-Coborn, at l-least.'

‘Ah, yeah, I didn’t think those two got along much,’ Ka’harja replied. ‘Did something happen between them?’

Coff shook his head. ‘N-No. They just— They just— Just—’

‘Just don’t?’ Ka’harja offered.

Coff nodded. ‘Y-Yea—’

‘HAH!’ Distro’s laugh cut in from above, and the boys turned to see her, Denni, and Dena staring down at them from the top of the hill. ‘GAY!’

‘THAT’S THE POINT!’ Ka’harja shouted back as his mother began her way down towards him. ‘Aw, no, what does she want— THIS IS A PRIVATE CONVERSATION! GO AWAY!’

‘YOU SKIPPED BREAKFAST!’ Distro stated incorrectly as she pointed to Denni, who brandished a loaf of bread high above her head. ‘BUT IF YOU’RE GOING TO BE UNGRATEFUL, THEN FINE! DENNI?’

The loaf of bread sailed in a perfect arc through the air and Ka’harja didn’t have time to realise what was happening before it hit him full in the face.

‘Ow!’ Ka’harja exclaimed, dramatically motioning from his face to the bread. ‘Seriously? *SERIOUSLY?!*’

‘LOVE YOU!’ his mother called back. Then she headed back up the hill and put an arm around each of her friends (well... one arm went around Dena, while the other linked with Denni’s tail) as they headed back towards camp.

‘Gods! I swear! Sometimes she’s just— UGH!’ Ka’harja flopped onto his back and gave a groan. ‘Sorry about her.’

‘N-No, i-it’s alright,’ Coff picked up the bread from the ground and brushed it off. ‘I-It was n-nice of h-her to— To—’

Ka’harja sighed again. Yeah, he *supposed* it was nice of her. But she didn’t have to interrupt!

‘Y-You sh-should eat,’ Coff held out the bread. ‘Y-You only had o-one bowl at break-breakfast. A-And you— You sk-skipped d-dinner last n-night, t-too.’

‘Yeah, I *guess* I’m still kinda hungry,’ he pushed himself up and took the bread from Coff. ‘Want some?’

‘N-No, I should— I should go, a-actually. I-I ha-have to— I have to organise m-my desk.’

‘Oh— Uh, okay,’ Ka’harja bit his lip and looked away. He didn’t feel like the conversation was over. He felt like there was a lot more that needed to be said... that he needed to ask. But he had no idea what it was, or how he could even *begin* to talk about any of it. He just knew he wasn’t sure about anything...

‘K-Ka’harja?’

He looked up to Coff, who carefully leant forward until their lips touched. It was short. Only a second, at most, before Coff pulled back and got up to walk away. He didn’t say goodbye. Neither of them did. But that was alright. They didn’t need to say anything else.

That had been enough to answer all of his questions.

# Chapter 27

## Sitting Against a Tree; Just Outside of Camp

Merf 7<sup>th</sup>, Year 10,053 AE

Ka'harja hadn't been able to get the kiss off his mind all day. He'd lay down on the riverbank and just stared at the sky until Sken had kicked him and told him to come for lunch.

*Lunch.*

When it felt like he'd only just had breakfast?

He'd spent the whole day thinking. And about nothing he could really explain, either. Just thinking about Coff, as Coff, with no particular thoughts about him.

Coff.

Coff....

Coff was wonderful.

'Hey, mate, I asked you a question,' Trat's elbow met the side of Ka'harja's head, and he laughed as Ka'harja flinched. 'Scara, you're just gone, aren't you? Observant as mud.'

'Be nice, Trat,' Lif snickered from his place in the branches above. 'Don't compare him to mud! What did mud ever do to you?'

Ka'harja felt himself blush as the men laughed. But he also felt a grin work its way to his face as he rolled his eyes and looked to Felelor. 'I can't believe this is what you have to deal with.'

'Yeah, I know, right?' Felelor scoffed, taking a drink. 'Bunch'a arseholes.'

'They're not *that* bad,' Naranako gave a laugh before planting a kiss on Felelor's cheek. He left a notable amount of his lipstick behind as he rose to his feet, though neither he nor his uncle seemed to notice. 'Anyway, Sken wanted me to help Coborn clean up after lunch, so I'll see you all later.'

At the mention of Coborn, Lif leapt out of the tree. 'I'll help, too,' he said coolly— Though not coolly enough to distract from his attempt to fix his hair. 'It'd be rude to leave all the work to the two of you.'

'Yeah,' Trat snickered. 'Because it's the *work* you're thinking about.'

'Wh- Of course it is!' Lif snapped, blush creeping over his cheeks.

'You know she's not going to fuck you, right?' Felelor snorted. 'No matter how

nice you are to her.'

Lif's cheeks grew darker, as did his glare.

'I dunno,' Trat punched Lif in the shoulder. 'If he looks pitiful enough she might!'

'Come on, guys,' Naranako took Lif's arm and hung off it, his ears flicking back as he shook his head. 'Can't a guy be nice to a girl without having his motives questioned?'

'Yeah,' Ka'harja chimed in. 'Leave him alone. Jokes like that aren't fun.'

'I think they are,' said Trat.

'That's because you're a piece of shit!' Lif retorted as Naranako dragged him away. He raised his middle finger before disappearing behind one of the caravans.

'Heh, I love that loser,' Trat chuckled as the boys left. 'Bloody idiot though, huh? Coborn, of all girls.'

'Coborn's nice,' Ka'harja commented, much to Trat's amusement.

'Exactly! It'd never work out,' Trat gave a sniff and scratched at a scar along his arm. 'She'd figure out how big a dick he is sooner or later and ditch him.'

'I dunno,' Felelor gave a chuckle. 'I hear girls *like* big dicks.'

Trat choked, and had to cover his mouth and pace a few steps before he could swallow down his laughter.

Ka'harja didn't think it was that funny.

'Speaking of big dicks,' Trat gave another sniff and turned to Felelor to give him a kick. 'Baku. He was wondering if you had any books lying around?'

'What's he want with *my* books?' Felelor snorted. 'He's got his own! And I don't think I've seen him finish one in years!'

'Yeah, nah, it's for Stars,' replied Trat. 'Apparently she's ploughed through all of his *and* Coff's stuff, and now she's looking for something else to attack.'

'Scara, that girl! Are we sure she's actually reading them and not just, I don't know, *eating* the pages?' Felelor shook his head and, with a humoured grunt, pushed himself to his feet. 'Alright. I'll have a poke around and see what I can find, then.'

'Might want to wipe your face, first,' Trat commented as he pulled out a handkerchief. 'Naranako's left his lips behind.'

'Ugh!' Felelor took the cloth from Trat and rubbed at his cheek. 'That kid never learns. Not a damn brain-cell in his head! I've taught him how to put that crap on properly; but *does* he? No! Instead he gets it everywhere like some sort of fourth eclipser!'

'Could be worse,' Ka'harja shrugged.

'Yeah,' Trat laughed as Felelor handed back his handkerchief. 'He could have borrowed Coborn's makeup.'

'Gross,' Felelor huffed, then sucked at the back of his throat and spat noisily on the ground. 'At least Naranako's is a nice colour. I can pass purple off as a bruise.'

'Ah, a bit of pink would do you good!' snorted Trat.

'It's not the pink I'm worried about,' Felelor retorted before motioning for his friend to follow him. 'It's that new cyan shit she brought back in Oktoka! Have you seen it, yet?'

'No, I don't think so....'

The boy's voices trailed off as they made their way back to the caravans, and Ka'harja let out a sigh as he was left in the company of the tree.

The quiet was nice. Mostly.

When it didn't help his thoughts run wild on him.

He scratched at his neck and sniffed. He had a lot of thoughts that could run wild, today.... Maybe it wasn't the best idea to sit on his own.

Another sigh, and Ka'harja pushed himself to his feet.

Maybe his mother was free; though probably not. She'd been spending an awful lot of time with his aunt.

And Dena....

He shook his head.

Dena and his mother had really latched onto each other; especially now that Distro was feeling better. It was great! But also terrible.

Ka'harja was happy for his mother. And for Dena. Neither had many friends and them finding something in each other was a good thing.

Though, he couldn't help but feel a little put-off by it all.

Dena wasn't very nice to him. Sure, she was nicer than she had been a month ago, and it was obvious that she was *trying* to be kind to Ka'harja— But she still had her moments.

He tried not to take it personally; she was like this to everyone except Distro and Stars. Fuck, he'd even heard her lose her temper with Sken before! *Sken!* He'd never have the guts to do that! He barely had the confidence to talk with her normally, let alone pick a fight.

Ka'harja paused as he reached Denni's caravan.

Then, he chuckled.

Denni.

Dena.

It was funny that their names were so similar.

'Ka'harja?' his mother's voice called from inside. 'What are you giggling about out there?'

'Nothing,' Ka'harja replied. 'Sorry, I just wanted to say hi.'

'Well then, don't just hang around the door! Get in here!'

Ka'harja didn't need to be told twice. He slipped inside the homely caravan and looked around.

There were more people than he was expecting.

Denni, Tayal, and Werani were there of course, sitting around a small table with Distro and Dena. He had expected to find at least *some* combination of his family and Dena, that wasn't what caught him off guard— It was Coff and Stars that surprised him.

Coff was sitting at the table with the rest of the group while Stars lay on one of the beds, staring intently at the pages of a thick book with a colourful cover.

Stars didn't acknowledge him (clearly focusing very hard on her reading), but Coff was sitting frozen in his seat with a handful of dice; his eyes wide as he stared straight at Ka'harja.

'Uh,' Ka'harja met eyes with the healer and felt his cheeks start to burn. 'Hey,

Coff. Are you... here for my mum?’

‘Oh— Uh. H-Hi,’ Coff blushed back, and finally seemed to remember what he was doing. He threw the dice across the table but didn’t pay attention to where they went, and Distro had to catch them as they nearly rolled off the edge. ‘Um.... Sort of. Sh-She in-invited me to... uh....’

Ka’harja gave a nod as Coff motioned the the game pieces and map laid haphazardly in front of them. ‘You play Caves and Creatures?’

‘Um, y-yes. I...’ Coff looked away, now, and began counting what he’d rolled. ‘I th-thought I.... I thought I mentioned....’

‘Oh, um... maybe?’ Ka’harja couldn’t recall if he’d spoken to Coff about the game before. Though, it didn’t surprise him that he couldn’t remember; *he always had such a terrible memory....* ‘You probably did. You know me. It’s like throwing slices of meat at a window; nothing really stays stuck for long.’

Coff gave a half-chuckle before biting his lip and motioning to Denni. ‘Uh, twenty-six damage.’

‘Well, y’ve made a mess, that’s fer sure,’ Denni chuckled. ‘Y’send th’seces halfway cross th’room, knockin’ over plates and chairs and others, ‘til ‘e crashes in’tah ‘is mates and all of ‘em tumble t’ th’floor. After a second, y’notice a pool of blood startin’ t’form under ‘im.’

‘Is he dead?’ Dena asked, curiously.

‘Gone have t’check t’see.’

The table all glanced to Tayal, who shook his head.

‘Uh-uh! Nah, Morellin ain’t gone go *near* that guy, even if ‘e ain’t breathin’!’ Tayal exclaimed. ‘Bastard tried t’kill ‘er! Sh’ain’t checkin’ on ‘im!’

‘You have the highest healer’s stats,’ Distro argued. ‘You’re the one who’ll be able to tell if he’s really dead!’

‘Nup! Sh’ain’t doin’ it!’

‘Uh, y-you guys k-keep pl-playing,’ Coff waved a hand and stood, taking Ka’harja by the arm and giving him a tug. ‘I, uh, w-want t-to t-t-t-talk to-to—’

‘Aight, see ya in a bit, ay?’ Werani waved a dismissive hand, before turning to join in the arguing. ‘*Well ah ain’t goin’ in!*’ he said, his voice high as he spoke in-character. ‘*Th’seces ‘most killed me! Ah can’t—*’

Ka’harja didn’t catch the rest of the sentence as Coff dragged him outside.

‘Th-thank Scara you c-came in wh-when you-you did!’ Coff exclaimed, a relieved look passing over his face as he sighed heavily. ‘I-I d-don’t know h-how much— Much more I-I-I c-could t-take of th-that!’

‘Yeah, they’re a *lot* with that game, aren’t they?’ Ka’harja chuckled, giving a shrug. ‘Part of why I don’t play. I mean, that, and that I can’t focus on it for more than ten minutes.’

Coff gave a nervous chuckle, and gave his stubbly facial hair a rub. ‘I-I th-think I prefer-er-er pl-playing with B-Bak-Baku and C-Coborn.’

‘Understandable,’ Ka’harja chuckled. ‘They seem a lot more level-headed about this sort of thing.’

‘Y-Y-Yeah,’ Coff agreed. ‘N-No off-offense t-to your m-mother, b-but... sh-sh-she... uh....’

'She flipped the table again, didn't she?'

'Yeah,' Coff let out a wheeze of a laugh.

'Yeah,' Ka'harja echoed. 'She does that— Aw, *fuck!*'

Ka'harja let out a shout and stumbled forward as something roughly the same size, shape, and weight as Stars leapt onto his back and clung onto him.

'Stars?!' he exclaimed as managed to right himself. 'Don't *do* that!'

'Why not?' Stars giggled, pulling herself close into Ka'harja so she could bury her face into his hair. 'Kekik Distro does it to you!'

'Mum's half your size!' Ka'harja retorted, unable to hide a laugh as he hooked his arms under Stars' legs and pulled her up so her knees weren't digging into his back. 'You almost knocked me over!'

'But I didn't,' Stars said, a cheeky note to her voice. 'You're still standing up just fine!'

'Barely!'

'Maka!' Stars gave a giggle. 'You're fine!'

'I'm not a liar,' Ka'harja lied. 'I've never told a single lie. Not once in my entire life!'

Coff let out a small chuckle, covering his mouth as he did, and Ka'harja felt his heart skip a beat.

*Coff's laughter was so beautiful...*

'I'm very glad you're my friend, Ka'harja,' Stars said, burying her face into Ka'harja's hair as she did. 'You're the best friend I've ever had. I love you. Kosson.'

'Heh, thanks. You're a really good friend, too. Kosson, Stars. Kosson,' Ka'harja chuckled, adjusting his grip on Stars as she gave an excited wiggle. Then, he eyed Coff and felt his heart beat harder. 'Uh... so. Coff? You said you wanted to talk to me about something?'

'O-Oh, y-yeah, no,' Coff went bright red. 'I-I l-ied. I just n-needed an excuse t-to l-leave...'

Ka'harja couldn't help but laugh. 'Oh, yeah. I uh.... I understand. Mum's one thing, but Denni and Tayal are another.'

'Y-You can s-say th-that again....'

'Oh, can I do it this time?' Stars shifted on Ka'harja's back.

'Uh... sure?' Ka'harja chuckled. 'Go ahead.'

'Kekik Distro is one thing, but Denni and Tayal are another!'

Coff echoed Ka'harja's laughter, rubbing the back of his neck as he did. 'Wh-What do T-Tayal and D-Denni e-even d-d-d-*do*? B-Beside b-being an-annoy-annoying? Th-They don't h-have any-anything to s-sell.... How d-do they...?'

'Oh, they're mail couriers,' Ka'harja explained. 'They have a route from here all the way to Canis and back. Though...' Ka'harja trailed off; feeling his heart drop. He couldn't tell Coff that the felinics sometimes skimmed things from their parcels, could he?

'Though...?' Coff echoed, curiously.

'Well.... They're felinic,' Ka'harja gave a hesitant click of his tongue. He wasn't sure how Coff would react to the idea of someone *stealing*. It made him so nervous, being a thief himself— What if Coff condemned it? What if he thought it was some

kind of unforgivable act? *He had to tread carefully...* ‘And you know how felinics.... Well.... Denni and Tayal never really *grew up* if you get what I mean?’

‘They st-steal?’ Coff guessed.

‘Usually just food,’ Ka’harja quickly added, feeling his hands grow sweaty and sticky on Stars’ legs. ‘Or money to rent a room. You know?’

‘I-I mean. I-I can un-underst-st-stand th-that. The— The r-road’s not always f-fair to t-t-travellers.’

‘I used to steal,’ Stars said, wrapping her arms tighter around Ka’harja’s shoulders. ‘When Lah’kort wouldn’t feed me enough I would wait until everyone was asleep and then take food from Kay’oten’s store.... She thought I was too stupid to lie about doing it, so I never got caught. Turns out *she* was the stupid one!’

‘Heh...’ Ka’harja gave a nervous chuckle at the mention of his first mother, and carefully bent down to deposit Stars on the ground.

It took her a moment to understand that Ka’harja was trying to put her down, but when she realised, she quickly slipped off his back onto her own feet and all but danced her way in front of him. ‘Ka’harja! Have you ever read Adoration’s Obsession?’

‘Huh?’ Ka’harja blinked dumbly as he stood up straight. ‘What’s who?’

‘Adoration’s Obsession,’ Stars repeated. ‘It’s a book! Baku leant it to me. It’s about a “zokex” who’s outcast from other zokex! Though, I don’t... know what a zokex is.’

‘Just another race,’ Ka’harja chuckled. ‘You know. Like there’s nurlak, foxen, dassen, secas... there’s also zokex.’

‘Ah! I see!’ Stars beamed. Then, her face fell. ‘It’s very strange. She really likes nurlak a lot. Which I thought would be nice because nobody in Heck’ne ever seems to like nurlak, but.... I don’t like the *way* she likes us. I don’t know why, but it feels very wrong.’

‘It-it’s supposed to b-be un-un-un— It’s supposed to be uncomfortable,’ Coff chimed in. ‘It’s ac-actually a f-fantasy retelling of the d-dassen o-origin t-tale. Ad-Adoration w-was a r-real p-person who fet-fetishised nurlak. Sh-She k-kidnapped a n-nurlak ch-child and— And— And—’ he took a deep breath. ‘She killed a nurlak child and stole their sk-skin.’

‘Oh...’ Stars looked *very* uneasy at that. ‘I liked her better when she was fake.’

‘Mm,’ Coff gave an agreeable hum. ‘Y-Yeah. I-I, uh, th-think every-every— I think every-one-one who learns about her h-has th-that thought.’

The queasy look didn’t leave Stars’ face as she shuffled in place; her ears flicking back and forth as if she was listening out for something.

‘Stars...?’ Ka’harja asked, gently. ‘You alright?’

‘I need to see my Little Demon!’ she blurted, turning on her heels and bolting off towards the middle of camp.

‘Oh, um— Okay!’ Ka’harja exclaimed as Stars ran off. ‘Should we... make sure she’s alright?’

‘Y-Yeah, I th-think s-so,’ Coff answered. The healer rubbed his arm for a moment before starting after the nurlak woman.

The boys followed Stars at a much more casual pace; catching a glimpse of her

clambering into Sken and Annanyn's caravan as they turned a corner.

She'd left the door ajar, and when Ka'harja poked his head in and politely knocked he found Stars clutching her baby tightly as Sken and Annanyn watched on, confused-but-sympathetic expressions on their faces.

Sken cast Ka'harja and Coff a glance as they entered, and Ka'harja just shrugged.

'There's child murder in the book she's reading,' he told them.

'*Oh...*' Annanyn breathed, giving a little nod as her confusion turned to understanding. 'Yeah. That'd freak me out too, I think.'

Sken's hands found their way to Stars' shoulders, squeezing them as she gently turned Stars and guided her to a nearby chair. 'Come on. Let's get you sat down....'

# Chapter 28

## A Circle on the Floor; Sken's Caravan

Merf 7<sup>th</sup>, Year 10,053 AE

For the past hour and a half Ka'harja had been constantly reminded of just how terrible he was at math.

After Stars had sat down and had a moment to breathe, Annanyn had made the suggestion they play a game to get her mind off things— It was, however, a math game. And even though Ka'harja hated math, he really liked Stars. So he'd agreed to play with her and the others.

*Troubling Travels*, it was called.

He'd heard of the game a few times before, though he'd never actually *played* it. It was half a board game, half a gambling game, and apparently the reason his great-grandmother (on his grandmother's side) had divorced her husband.

And now he could see why.

He bit his tongue as Stars rolled her coins, moved her piece, and picked up the card from the tile she'd landed on.

'I... is... *ice*...?' she read, slowly, before turning to Sken and handing the woman the card. 'I don't know what this says.'

'Island,' Sken read aloud. 'With a silent 'S'... *Island hopper, take another turn.*'

Stars grinned, picking up the five movement coins and shaking them loosely in her hands. 'What is an island, anyway?' she asked as she threw the coins to the floor and began counting the ones that had landed on heads. 'I've seen that word in books a few times but I can't figure out what it means.'

*Three spaces*, Ka'harja noted as she took her second turn and collected two coins from the pot.

'An island is a, uh... a big bit of land,' Annanyn tried. 'In the ocean?'

'What's the ocean?'

'Uh...'

Ka'harja gave a sniff, casting a sideways glance to Coff as the healer scooped up the coins to roll his own turn. 'You know how sometimes it rains and you see big puddles, and those puddles have the tops of rocks sticking out of them?'

*Coff moved two spaces.*

'Yeah?' Stars twitched an ear curiously.

'Like that,' Ka'harja said, retrieving the coins and throwing them down. 'The water is the ocean and the rocks are islands. Only the ocean is so big that we'd be like ants on the rocks.'

'Oh...' Stars' twitching ear stuck up straight. 'Like the big water that Zen'efay and her sisters flew over to get to Rendi?'

'Yeah, just like that,' he confirmed. 'Uh... no heads. I don't move.'

'Sucks to be you,' Sken joked as she collected up the coins and tossed them onto the floor again. 'Three spaces.... *Fuck.*'

'Aw, *no,*' Annanyn gave her wife a sympathetic pat on the back. 'Again?'

Sken flicked one of the coins she'd collected back into the pot, and leant over to retrieve a card from the deck. 'Bloody hell, that is the *fourth* lose tile I've landed on in a row!' she complained, placing the card she'd drawn face-down on the tile to change its status. 'Luck's not on my side, today.'

'If it makes you feel better, luck's *never* on *my* side,' Ka'harja said, offering the secas a sheepish grin.

'So what you're saying is this is *your* fault?' Sken teased. Then she shook her head. 'Do your games always turn out like this?'

'Oh, I've never actually played board games before,' Ka'harja admitted. 'Mum banned them from the house.'

'What?' Annanyn's tail-tip flicked in confusion and her fin hit the ground with a quiet *plat!* 'Why?'

All Ka'harja could do was cast Annanyn a raised-brow look and shake his head. 'Look at her friends and take a guess.'

'They cheat?' Sken asked, returning Ka'harja's look with her own as he nodded.

'*Oooh,*' Stars gave a low, knowing hum. 'That explains....'

'Explains what?'

'Why Tayal got mad at Kekik Distro when I told her she'd miscounted her dice roll,' said Stars. 'She miscounted on purpose, didn't she? She was cheating, wasn't she?'

'Y-Yeah,' Coff gave a quick nod. 'Sh-She was ch-ch-ch-ch— She was cheating. S-So was W-W-Wer-Wer-Wer.... Werani.'

'*You* better not be cheating,' Sken joked, nudging Ka'harja.

'No, of course not,' Ka'harja raised his hands in mock-defence. 'I mean. Just look at this cute little face and tell me I'm capable of lying, let alone *cheating!*'

Coff snorted a laugh, covering his mouth to smother it as Sken flicked her eyes at him and shook her head.

Then she looked at Ka'harja with a cool, humoured expression. 'The only reason you haven't been cheating is because you're scared of me, yeah?'

'Yeah,' Ka'harja answered. 'Bang on.'

Annanyn gave her own giggle, which she quickly swallowed down as she collected the coins for her turn. 'I've been cheating this entire game.'

'*Annanyn!*' Sken exclaimed as she turned to her wife with an exasperated gasp.

'I think I would cheat, if I didn't like you all so much,' Stars added with an agreeable nod.

‘Stars— Ugh!’ Sken threw her hands in the air playfully. ‘Am I the only honest one here?’

‘I-I-I-I—’ Coff raised his hand.

A humoured snort escaped Sken’s gills as she looked to the man. ‘Ah. At least *someone* here has some integrity!’

Ka’harja couldn’t help but laugh as Coff lowered his hand, and he nudged his.... Wait, *was* Coff his boyfriend?

They’d both expressed an interest in each other. And Coff had kissed him. But they’d never actually explicitly... *agreed*... that they were boyfriends....

Was it overstepping a boundary to assume...?

It didn’t seem like it, but... he still couldn’t be sure.

‘Ka’harja, you okay?’ Sken asked.

‘Uh... yeah,’ Ka’harja mumbled, pulling himself out of his thoughts. ‘Just thinking about...’ he cast a glance to Coff, feeling himself blush. ‘*Stuff*.’

The healer’s cheeks turned pink as Ka’harja met his eye, and after a moment both boys glanced away from each other.

Much to Sken’s delight.

‘You two are *adorable*!’ she teased, scooping up the abandoned coins on the floor and passing them to Stars. ‘Nothing quite like seeing a new couple flounder about.’

‘*Mhm!* Brings back some memories, doesn’t it?’ Annanyn gave a giggle, flicking her wife playfully on the nose. ‘When we first got together Sken had *no* idea what she was doing! I basically had to hold her hand through the first year.... I could tell you some stories.’

Sken’s cheeks blushed pink and purple, and she rubbed the back of her neck. ‘C’mon, puddle-hopper, don’t embarrass me.’

‘Naw, *Skenny!*’ Annanyn teased, shifting so she could press tight against her wife. ‘It’s my *job* to embarrass you!’

Sken coughed, clearing her throat as her blush deepened and she looked to the floor in a sheepish way. She bit her lip, trying to hide her grin as Annanyn pressed against her.

‘Naw, come on, my *widdle kelp-knot!* Don’t you—’

‘Gighi, it *is* easy to cheat!’ Stars’ loud exclamation interrupted Annanyn’s teasing, and everyone turned to see Stars dropping a handful of coins into the small pile she’d already collected. ‘Nobody noticed I took three times as many coins I was meant to!’

‘*Stars!*’

# Chapter 29

## The Caravan's Campsite; The Okatako-Bokwok Border Merf 20<sup>th</sup>, Year 10,053 AE

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 tone 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 lift her spirits. Even if 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 roughhousing.’

‘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 air 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 30

## Coff's Bed; Coff's Caravan Merf 30<sup>th</sup>, Year 10,053 AE

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 *embarrassing* 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 *embarrassing*. *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-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 toes 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, casting 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 pinned 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 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 31

## Just Outside of Town; Kokako Boaka Jasfe 4<sup>th</sup>, Year 10,053 AE

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 agreeance. ‘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 silence. 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 scarcely 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 daughter's 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 they need 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 a 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. 'There's one I've been to a few times, its got a good menu, 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 over her skin. Though, it was still noticeable.

'Alright, Sweetheart,' Distro kissed him back and ruffled his hair. 'I should be done 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 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, and Ka'harja knew exactly how miserable the man was feeling.

*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. I can see the courier dragon coop, from here. Which means we can write. And... maybe you can visit?'

'Th-Th-Thank 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-we 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 32

## **A Table in the Corner; The Local Tavern** **Jasfe 4<sup>th</sup>, Year 10,053 AE**

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. 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!'

'Do you think she'd teach me how to shift?'

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 each girl a small box of food (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 dawning over him. ‘It  
was *you!*’

‘Oh fuck—’ panic shot through Ka’harja and he instantly 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; Annanyn 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, 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 him,' Felelor snorted.

'Oh, Coff, I am so jealous of you!' Naranako gave a sigh as he completely ignored his uncle in favour of leaning over to flick 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 kind of 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 Annany. 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 33

## The Main Room; Home Jasfe 4<sup>th</sup>, Year 10,053 AE

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 only a little over a ruler's length 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 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 she 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!’ Annanyn 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 felinic-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 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 d-do 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 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 Little Demon 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. 'Once I've finished my training I'll 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 healers. *Good* healers. 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!'

**End.**

# Afterword

Thank you for reading the first book of *Don't Lose Hope!* I hope you enjoyed it as much as I loved writing it.

If you want to read more, you can find the series on **demrefor.com**

The next book, *Misfitted*, features Stars' struggles with adjusting to Empire culture while dealing with the grief of abandonment.