

## Chapter 9 – “Humanity”

A few hours had gone by and nighttime was quickly approaching. Picking up the red-hot glowing knife from the fire with a piece of cloth wrapped around the handle, Kai bit down on a piece of leather in his mouth.

"GARGH!" He growled around the leather. The sizzling sound and smell of his wounds being cauterized were sickening his senses but he kept the blade steady. Using this method of sterilizing and stopping a bleed was in no way optimal or efficient but Kai had no other options with his current situation.

Putting down the quickly cooling blade, he wiped off the beads of cold sweat trickling down his forehead and face.

If it hadn't been because he had already emptied the content of his stomach, he would've done so again. Although Kai wanted nothing more than just to go to sleep right then and there as exhaustion clouded his mind, he couldn't afford to do so, and before long, he had re-applied his makeshift bandage and was moving through the inhospitable bog of swamplands.

Kai needed to find a place to rest and hide for the night, but he was worried he wouldn't be able to make much headway before the creatures of the night began emerging from their slumber.

After walking- or well, hobbling for a while, Kai found himself in a relatively dense part of the swamps.

Ever since having encountered that bow-wielding native, he had been on high alert, now knowing that there were others in these swamps, but also that they were most likely hostile. However, instead of continuing on moving deeper in, he all of a sudden stopped entirely.

There was something... *wrong* about this place.

He couldn't put his finger on it, but his gut feeling was telling him there was something he should be paying attention to. With Kai being one to have always trusted his instincts, he quickly turned vigilant as he scouted the surroundings.

But even so, it didn't prepare him for the ragged blade that was suddenly hovering at his neck, its cold edge chilling his flesh as it kissed his skin.

"Just what do you think you're doing in our territory, you accursed lurker?" A feminine, but rough voice said, breaking the silence that had otherwise taken over the surroundings.

Standing to his side, Kai could spot from the corner of his eye a female clad in beast furs who held the offending blade prodding his throat. With the amount of venom, she spat the word 'lurker' with, Kai didn't doubt that she bore some deep-seated hatred towards... whatever *it* meant.

Not exactly knowing *why* he had been branded as such, Kai could only attribute the sudden hostility pointed towards him due to the clothes on his person.

Seeing as her clothes were obviously of different make from both the first dead man Kai had found and the second one that he killed himself, it stood to reason that they may belong to different parties that, unfortunately for Kai, had apparent strife between them.

"I don't know what all this lurker crap is, but I'm no-" Kai tried to say, but only got to hiss out his last word as the woman drew a thin streak of blood from his neck by pressing the surprisingly sharp edge of her sword against his skin.

"Shut it." She spat. "I have no intentions of listening to the words of you forsaken bastards."

*Forsaken? Bastard? Isn't she putting this kinda harsh?* Kai thought, wondering why he deserved to keep being put on such a backfoot every time he finally met people who could possibly help him survive in this gods-blasted swamp.

"What's this fucker doing here?" The voice of a young man said, exiting the foliage.

"Wait... that really *is* a lurker..." Another voice said, this one even younger, clear apprehensive but also awe in his voice.

Accompanied by the two voices, an additional two young men followed, making for a total of four boys. They were sixteen at the least and twenty at the most. Compared to the others, the woman, who matched Kai at around twenty-two, was clearly the most experienced and weathered of the group. Making her the leader.

Carrying bows and knives, two of the lads had what looked like beavers slung over their shoulder with some rope, one for each man. Surprised at seeing his first actual mammal since coming to the swamps, Kai wondered just where the hell the big bastards had been hiding all the while he had been out hunting.

Taking a step forward, one of the boys, the oldest one of them, puffed out his chest.

"Elyn, I'll take care of this one." He said, him wanting to impress the more mature woman, obvious to any who didn't have half a pea for a brain. "No need to stain your hands on this one."

Shooting the posturing boy look, she gave a short but strong shake of her head.

"No." The woman named Elyn tersely said, causing the boy to inflate like a popped balloon under her piercing gaze. Chuckling to himself despite this rather dire situation, Kai couldn't help but find the scene amusing.

"What's so funny, filth?" Elyn said.

Finally seeing an opportunity to plead his case without having his arteries severed, Kai hastily spoke.

"I'm not a lurker, or whatever it is. But these are not my clothes if that's why you're condemning m-" He managed to get out before the blade pressed even harder against his flesh, drawing another streak of blood down her blade.

"What game are you trying to play?" She asked, her tone seething with annoyance. However, she was clearly now expecting a response, and Kai happily capitulated.

"I found a dead man - and his clothes, I kinda needed them. I seriously don't have the slightest clue what this '*lurker*' means, but what can I do to prove I'm not one?" Kai said, his mind filling with relief as hesitation finally found its way onto the exotic woman's face.

Thinking for a few seconds, she seemed to remember something. Trailing the tip of her sword down his neck, over the collarbone, and to his shirt, she pulled the cloth down and peered at the naked flesh of his chest.

Although what she was looking for was scar tissue, and she definitely found some... found too much of it... she couldn't see any brand.

Letting out a breath, without any preamble she dropped her sword to her side. A bit stunned by the sudden change, Kai wasn't sure how to react.

"Just off him already big sis Elyn, he might just be an Eniri instead." The impatient-looking young boy said.

"Silence! - Arek." She blurted out, stunning the poor boy. "He isn't a damn lurker. He's got no brand. And even if he was an Eniri, their pride sure as hell wouldn't allow them to even look at a lurker's clothes, let alone wear them. "

"Oh, so that's what it was? Tree submerged in swamp water kinda-lookin' thing?" Kai asked curiously.

Nodding tiredly, Elyn spoke. "Indeed, it's the mark of the lurkers. Those traitorous beasts..." It was clear as day that this young but mature woman had a seething hatred and anger for these lurkers. While Kai couldn't know exactly what had caused this enmity, but he could definitely recognize it as a deeply ingrained hatred that has rooted itself over many years.

All of a sudden closing the distance, she held her sword behind her back as she inspected Kai's face; a bit too intensely for his own liking.

"Your face is kinda weird." She simply said, making Kai scoff. He could say the same about her, the exotic and alien features just as weird to him as his own were to her.

"Well, I've definitely had women say worse things, " He joking laughed. "So I'll take that one as a compliment."

He gestured to himself. "As you can see," He said. "I'm not quite from around here."

A frown now creasing her brow, she drew back. "Then where, outsider?"

"Outsider? Definitely, has a better rang to it than 'scum' and 'filth'." He smiled teasingly.

"Answer the question." She growled, her frown turning to a scowl.

"Heh - Really not one for joking around, are you..." He said shaking his head. However, she shot just shot him a piercing gaze, seeing through his ploy to make her lower her guard.

He used social and conversational cues not because he wanted to escape or assault her, but rather just to give himself a better advantage if worse came to shove. A better footing so to speak.

Churning his thoughts for a reply, Kai rubbed the back of his head somewhat embarrassedly. "Well... I... You see, that's the fact, I don't know."

"You don't know?" She droned out like she was speaking with an idiot.

"Well, it's rather because I don't quite remember." Kai lied, seeing as telling her that he was a person from another world, met with a cosmic being, and then transferred across different dimensions and planes, didn't seem like a story that would fly here.

Seeing that she was pondering his words, Kai took the opportunity to ask one of his own questions as she might've been more amenable now.

"So wha-" But as he was about to inquire further about what the hell a lurker meant, and exactly why they were, as she put it, 'traitorous beasts'. However, he was cut off by the sudden and unexpected command from Elyn.

"Turn around - hands to your back." He terse tone brokering no quarter.

"What?" Kai managed to get out before his eyes were once again met with the cold hard edge of Elyn's ragged sword.

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Walking along the muddy bog of the swamps as he followed the group of hardened youths, Kai found himself rather uncomfortable as his hands were tied together behind his back. He tried to make conversation, to see if he could fish out some information out of them, if not to also quench his boredom.

But the strict Elyn had ordered both the group of four boys and himself not to speak nor make any sound. Reluctantly, Kai could only follow, the fate that lay at their destination unknown to him. Catching the figure of a Knucklehead Toad cresting the water of a pond that they walked past, Kai remembered something as he read the name prompt that popped into his head.

If he could see the name of the toads and other critters, then could he not also do the same with humans?

It had not occurred to him before now as the prompts usually came on their own, whereas the few encounters with humans that he's had, none had ever presented themselves. Curious, and with nothing better to do, he focused intently on the woman.

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[Elyn Trake - Skin Hardening]

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Surprising Kai, almost making him stumble, it was with an apparent ease that he could simply *will* the prompt to appear, which caught him rather off-guard. Reading the prompt, he was both delighted and confused.

This ability from his [**Interface**] trait could even identify humans and display their names. However, when he read the affix of '**Skin Hardening**' he stopped dead in his tracks.

Realizing the possibility, Kai's heart suddenly started beating faster.

*Could this...? Could it really be...*

*Cultivation!*