

Chapter 22 – “With Fortune, Often Comes Tribulation”

As Kai ended the last Lurker with a forceful stomp to the neck that sent out the sickening sound of bone cracking, he smiled - satisfied. He and his group had just taken out the entire group of Lurkers without losing a single life in the process or someone even getting grievously hurt.

Yanking out the dagger embedded in the chest of the man whose cervical vertebrae he had just cracked and dislodged, Kai gave an appreciative nod at the dagger that still held strong even though it was of relatively shoddy make. Although he had been offered a spear or a sword, Kai ended up declining it in favor of the dagger, mostly because he had zero experience of wielding such weapons.

Daggers instead were a lot more intuitive to use and Kai liked it close and personal rather than fighting at an arm's length since with a short blade he could easily shift into a fist stance or a grapple. Besides, he had fought against people with knives more than once before in his previous life, so he generally knew their restrictions and advantages from the get-go.

Moving over to the two now stern-looking women still bound by the fire, Kai crouched in front of them, unsure what to do here.

"Hey - Kurin," Kai simply said, waiting until a rough-looking man approached from behind.

"Yes, Kai?" Kurin asked, a bit of apprehension clear in his voice after just having witnessed Kai's ruthlessness in slaughtering more than half of the Lurkers without even batting an eye or a smidgeon of hesitation.

"What would the Orak do with Eniri who have been captured?" He asked, not even glancing back at the warrior as Kai curiously scanned the two women's expressions of both gratitude and stout defiance.

"I-uh... we have no animosity with the Eniri, so we usually just set each other free and go our separate ways..." Kurin explained a bit warily, still not sure how to approach this mysterious and dangerous new party leader of his.

Ever since his battle with the lurkers a few days ago and his first step towards the path of cultivation, Kai had been gaining infamy and respect amongst the warriors of the tribe. But surprising the warriors and even Kai himself, Alark had out of nowhere pronounced him as a hunting party leader, in charge of six 1st-stage warriors even though he wasn't even at the 1st-stage himself.

This had of course caused a lot of disgruntlement at first, but after Alark had Kai thoroughly beat each of his new party members into the proverbial ground of submission, one after another, Kai had been more than established as superior amongst the 1st-stage warriors.

But even so, that didn't mean they had completely shed the dislike and subconscious disregard of him as an outsider and non-warrior. However, Kai knew from experience that something like that would only wither away with time and effort, so he didn't take it to heart.

Kai wasn't sure about all this leader stuff though, but he assumed that Alark was testing his mettle. But he didn't stop speculating there, as he firmly believed there was probably someone else also behind this... maybe something like the mysterious chief...

After three days, and two successful hunting excursions, Kai was finally getting somewhat settled in with the party even though the only competent and experienced warrior was Kurin, all the other being newly-minted 1st-stage warriors who all were immature and foolhardy.

But even so, Kai made good use of them all.

That was why, after coming upon this party of eight Lurkers, even one of them being a 2nd-stage warrior as the leader, Kai took the risk to take them out. Although the odds were clearly uneven and obscure, it took almost no amount of convincing of his party to ambush them as almost every warrior of the tribe had a deep-seated and pent-up hatred for Lurkers, each of them having been scarred in some way or another.

Be it a lost parent or a killed relative, all of them had lost something to the Lurkers and the Slavers.

Nodding at the warrior's words, Kai simply sliced the restraints of the women as they rubbed their sore skin with gratitude clear in their eyes.

"Thank you..." One of the women finally said, getting to her feet as she thumped a fist to her chest twice in a common Eniri way of showing respect.

"I can spare you some water, and you have about half a day's time left before nightfall, that should be enough to yourselves back home I trust?" Kai asked off-handedly.

It was no noble act that Kai and his group had saved these women as the main drive for even braving such a risk had been purely because they wanted to test out his new strength, experience, most of all, satiate his hunger for battle. Plus, looting the corpses of other warriors was a rather lucrative sport as both non-rusted and well-maintained weapons, armor, and herbs were a rarity in the swamps.

Without a proper blacksmith to tend and care for weapons out here in the swamps, a good sword or pike became a commodity that could very well save your life.

But it was a small and inconsequential kindness of offering water that didn't really cost him anything, so he didn't mind offering some to these two women. Kai was as pragmatic as you could get, but that didn't mean that he was incapable of being decent.

Taking long and deep swigs of water from the offered waterskin, both women clasped a fist to their chests in another show of respect, but this one a more deeply felt one.

"Thank you very much for this." The other woman said, handing back the waterskin. "Our names are Mereen and Kayl-"

Kai cut them off with a raised hand as he didn't have time for pleasantries.

"We do not wish to be out in the open for any longer than necessary, and I doubt that the Lurkers had just been resting here rather than waiting for-"

As if Kai's words had been a divining, the moment just before he managed to finish that sentence, the swoosh of an arrow whistled past Kai.

There was only a dull thud as the arrow punching through the woman's eyeball, embedding itself in her socket as she crumbled to the ground like a puppet with its string cut, dead on the spot.

Kai's mind moved into overdrive as the all too familiar feeling of adrenaline rushing through his veins took his body for a second spin. Without needing to tell his body so, Kai had already thrown himself to the cover of a large tree root, scanning the surrounding with a calculative gaze when he landed.

But as he saw the scene before him, Kai cursed up a storm. The idiot newbie warrior who had been assigned to keeping watch had apparently blatantly disregarded Kai's command in favor of doing some corpse looting instead. Obvious by the fact as the young man was peppered with arrows as he was mid-looting one such corpse.

This had incidentally allowed the enemy war party to easily sneak up on Kai and his group.

"Shit, it was as I had surmised..." Kai cursed inwardly, watching the figures slowly approaching. "They weren't resting, but waiting for the Slavers goddammit... here of all places..."

By now, Kai's group had sought cover from the ambushers' arrows, with only the supposed-to-be scout and one of the female captives having been killed in the initial attack.

That meant he was currently at a severe disadvantage since he had only five abled warriors and a single unarmed Eniri against the enemy party of ten. But that wasn't the worst part.

[Ve'thek Trusgo - Bone Refinement]

Their leader was spearheading the ever-approaching enemy party, weapons poised and ready to slay. Like his fellow Slavers, he was brawny, with splotches of scaled skin across his arms

and parts of his face, finishing the fantasy-like image with the two pointy stumps protruding just over his forehead. It was the Dragonkin.

It was the first time seeing these odd humanoid creatures, and the rumors Kai heard of them being physically strong were evident by their collective musclebound figures. But nevertheless, their natural racial strength wasn't the only thing to be wary of here.

Killing a 2nd-stage warrior by taking him off-guard was one thing, fighting head to head against one was a whole different thing. While Kai could confidently hold out against a 2nd-stage in hand to hand combat for a minute or two, when it came to life and death battles with the sharp edges of weapons thrown into the mix, it wasn't hard to guess the outcome if he were to challenge the leader head-on.

Only a few moments had passed since the first arrow had been loosed, but Kai had already assessed the situation and knew there was only one option for him and his group at this point.

Looking to the many terrified faces who all looked back at him with bated breath, hoping for some plan that might get them out alive, Kai silently mouthed; "Scatter,"

Not needing to be told twice, everybody except the Eniri woman and Kai turned to run. It was clear that the reason why she stayed was because of the Eniri pride in her bones that would never let her run from a fight and that she had decided to go down fighting as her sister warrior had just died, but the reason why Kai stayed put was a lot less heroic than that.

The second his party moved to sprint in every direction, arrows were loosed from the Slavers, two of the arrows embedding themselves into the back of Kurin and another warrior while three other arrows went wide.

It was at that moment Kai finally made his move, sprinting away from his hiding spot. Was using his own party members as arrow bait, selfish and cold-hearted?

Yes, but that didn't matter to Kai.

He owed these guys he barely even knew nothing, and he sure as hell wasn't going to bet his own life like that to try and save them.

Kai had survived by any means necessary all his life, and he wasn't going to stop now from some random bout of heroism. With his window of opportunity ever-shrinking, he sprinted faster, pumping his legs forward like pistons, satisfied at the sounds of arrows hastily being knocked on a string to then fall way too short to even come close to his sprinting form.

During that small amount of time where they had to reload which he had purchased with the lives of two of his party members meant that he wasn't going to take an arrow to the back himself.

But that didn't mean he was out of the woods yet.

Kai sprinted and he sprinted, cursing as he couldn't shake the leader and two of his warriors who were still chasing him.

Although the 2nd-stage warrior wasn't necessarily that much faster than a 1st-stage warrior, his stamina and endurance were much - higher, as evident when he pulled forward, leaving his subordinates struggling to follow.

If not for the fact that Kai was in peak physical condition and that he had already gone halfway towards the 1st-stage after using the last remaining herbs given by Alark, even Kai would've been long exhausted.

It was only after fifteen full minutes of running and making sure he didn't leave obvious tracks behind in his mad dash that Kai finally lost sight of the chasing warriors.

The only problem now though, was that Kai hadn't the faintest idea where he was, and he was so tired he could collapse any second.

However, he couldn't rest out in the open as he still didn't know if the Slavers were tracking him, and if they found him in the current state he was in, Kai would barely be able to put up a resistance.

He briefly considered pushing his addled body to climb a tree, but in the corner of his eye, there was a dark maw of a vine-covered opening that caught his attention.

Dragging himself over there, Kai looked inside to check if there were any inhabitants, but after seeing there was none, he proceeded inside.

Kai had barely made it past the cavemouth when he suddenly emptied the contents of his stomach onto the rocky ground of the cave, a sign that he had well and truly pushed his body its limits to escape the pursuit of his assailants.

Moving deeper into the cave, Kai slumped against the damp and mossy cave wall, unable to care about the fact that his back was getting drenched in wet moisture as he had already sweated through his tunic during the mad dash. At that moment, all he ever wanted was to simply doze off, and allow his body some proper rest.

But just because there weren't any animals using this cave right now and no pursuers, that didn't mean that some wouldn't later. So he kept himself awake, trying to rest with focused breathing.

As time went by and strength finally began returning to his body, Kai finally began calming down, almost to the point where he feel asleep despite his efforts to stay awake.

And he might as well have if it wasn't for the sniffing sounds coming from the cave entrance breaking him out of his hazy state of mind.

Standing right there, a pristine grey-furred wolf in all its predatory glory was sniffing at his bile he emptied of his stomach just earlier, snarling as its mouth peeled back to reveal a set of deadly canines.

"Ah, shit..." He groaned, as the wolf swiveled on him, hackles rising and a deep guttural growl rumbling in its throat.