

Chapter 10 - "The Council"

Leading Kai through a curtain of dangling vines and roots, everybody followed closely behind Elyn as she took lead.

Kai honestly hadn't been sure what to expect beyond the veil covering their destination as he hadn't been allowed to utter a word since becoming their captive, but when he laid eyes upon the haphazardly constructed wooden fortifications build into a huge naturally formed swamp alcove, he was surprised, to say the least.

Some buildings were mere huts, others big and ostentatious as they rose high over the walled encampment. It all looked oddly pieced together, somewhat chaotic, however, still gave a feeling of being sturdy as the structures all used the dark-brown and thick oaks of the swamps. Outside of the fortifications, many different fields of various sizes could be seen growing what he guessed to be crops of some sort.

Not realizing that he had stopped and was just staring blankly at the settlement, Kai was suddenly almost knocked over as he received a rough shove from behind.

Barely managing to right himself before face planting into the mud beneath as his hands were still tied to his back, he shot a scathing glare backward.

Standing where he had just been, the swaggering kid who had been trying to cajole Elyn, was smiling devilishly with his hand stretched out; not even trying to hide that it was him that had done it.

It was obvious to any that he was the perpetrator, and seeing the clear disregard for him, the fighting spirit within Kai reared its ugly head.

He wanted nothing more than to beat the kid's face in at that moment...

But if not for Elyn shooting both the boy and Kai a look, he would've definitely charged at the kid right then and there; hands bound or not.

"Sigh - Come on, follow me." She said exhaustingly, finally breaking the silence that had been suffocating the air.

"Damn boys..." She muttered quietly as they broke stares, but just loud enough for Kai to pick up on it.

Being grabbed by the arm, Elyn pulled Kai with him, not that he could escape with his binds anyway. Well... that was only true if you didn't consider the fact that Kai was currently hiding a flinted arrowhead in his palm. Already having cut through most of the woven vine rope around his hands, he was confident that he could break the restraints with just a bit of effort if the situation turned real bad and called for it.

Being led to the decently-sized swing gate in the fortification, an archer up on the mounted platform of the small gatehouse called out.

"Elyn! - You're back, did you hunt some-" He called out, clearly familiar with the woman, but stopped upon laying eyes on Kai. "Wait - who the fuck is this? A lurker?!"

Sighing at the sudden turn of demeanor, Kai wanted nothing more than to change out of these damnable clothes.

"Not a lurker, Denevel - at least we don't believe he is." She called back, trying to soothe the emotions of the suddenly enraged archer. "We're taking him to the council to figure it all out, could you sent word?"

From this short interaction, it had been made that much clearer for Kai that these 'lurkers' were virtually despised by all; although he still wasn't entirely sure why.

"Of course Elyn, I'll send a messenger." He said, still warily looking at Kai.

Turning around, he shouted. "Open the gate and get Kalmier to run up and assemble the council!"

It was only a handful of seconds later that the large wooden gates that were just high enough that it could fit a horse and rider, swung open.

"It looks like you also got some game - Just leave them here and we will get them to the skinning huts."

"Thank you, Denevel." Elyn replied generously as she led the entourage of Kai and the young men inside the settlement.

Turning his head in every direction, Kai took in the sudden change of environment. From the dense and unforgiving swamplands to a fully-fledged village discreetly hidden within a naturally formed landscape wonder. It was a sight for sore eyes.

Everywhere, moving through buildings and over paved dirt roads, people of the same odd native ethnicity shared by Elyn and her goon squad could be seen going about their day.

Some sat under erected canopies outside wooden huts as they handcrafted various pots and tools, others were tending to resources such as animal furs and food preparing them for use or storage.

Although at a glance, everything from the settlement's infrastructure to the people haphazardly moving about, seemed very disorderly and chaotic, but after walking through the streets, Kai realized that it was just the opposite.

The streets and roads were narrow, however, they were more than enough to accommodate everyone. Looking closely, everything and everyone had their own purpose, working surprisingly well together.

For someone like Kai who had spent most of his life in concrete jungles, this was truly an alien sight for him. The only thing that made the experience unpleasant rather than interesting though, were the glares of death shooting holes in him as he walked with Elyn holding him firm by the arm.

It would appear that not only was it the guardsman Denevel who knew about how a lurker clothed themselves. If he was to interact with these people, he was already seriously on a backfoot from the get-go. But he could only toughen up, there wasn't really anything he could do about it in his current predicament.

After moving past what looked like a smithy - or well, more like a repair shop. Kai and his group stopped in front of the large entrance of a huge building that, if it was up to Kai to guess, was the town hall - or at least something similar.

Standing to the sides of the entrance, there were two guards both decked in worn-looking metal armor supplemented with leather in places where there wasn't enough metal. They honestly were rather comical to Kai as they looked like they had gone through a scrap yard and strapped on anything they could find.

But thinking about, out here in the swamps, that might just be the only equipment available...

Moving up to stand in front of one of them, Elyn bowed.

"The elders have arrived and are expecting you." The guard said simply.

Nodding without a word, Elyn guided the group through the entrance and into the building. But as Kai moved past them, he scrutinized both guards, inspecting them with his **[Interface]**.

[Garnel Ma'ar - Skin Hardening]

[Fendrel Kaen - Skin Hardening]

These two were the third and fourth person that Kai had seen with the weird affix of '**Skin Hardening**' to their names, like Elyn and the guardsman Denevel had.

Kai still wasn't completely sure what it meant, but he had grown to believe that it *must* have something to do with cultivation by now. He was itching to ask but knew that there should be more than enough time to ask such questions after he had gotten out of this... *predicament*.

The interior of the hall was rather spacious, allowing for a couple of dozen people at the least. The only lighting was a large hearth that ran through the middle of the hall and a few lit torches adorning the walls, however, it was more than enough to do light up most of the building.

Taking it all in, Kai was intrigued by the rustic but well-made quality of it all. Tarps, carpets, and furniture all hand-crafted and carved beautifully to depict various images and stories.

Marveling at it all, it took a few moments for Kai to notice all the eyes currently staring at him. Sitting by the hearth on various cushions and mats, were an assortment of elderly people and battle-hardened warriors.

There were six in total, but it didn't elude Kai's scanning gaze that another empty mat was laying at the head of the hearth.

"So," A wisened voice started coming from one of the old geezers. "This is what all the fuss is about?"

Bowing respectfully, Elyn took front and center.

"Elder Mala, this is a person we've found just one the outskirts of our territory." She said. "We originally thought him a lurker as he wore the clothes of one, however, before we sent him to meet his ancestors, he claimed himself not one. So after checking for his brand, we discovered that he truly didn't have one."

This 'Elder Mala' was an old man who appeared to be in his fifties at the least by Kai's estimation and looked like the kind of old grandpa that was conniving and cruel as his wrinkly forehead was curled up in a perpetual frown.

Walking over to Kai, Elyn pulled down the collar of his shirt to show his scarred by still unbranded skin.

"Since we also know of the pride held of the Eniri, we can also rule out him being one as a possibility. Therefore we've ta-" She explained before being suddenly interrupted.

"What does it matter if he's a lurker or not." Another wisened voice interjected, this time from an elderly woman just slightly younger than the geezer but still quite old. "He's an outsider and that's clear as day. We should simply conduct ourselves the way we have always done with those who are not of the Orak."

"Feed him to the night beasts." Elder Mala said while nodding sagely at the elderly woman's words.

"When did we start executing those who bear neither strife nor animosity to our people?" The female of the three warriors spoke up. "Have we truly fallen so low that the only way to go about things is execution?"

Shaking his head, the elder named Mala, locked gazes with the woman who just spoke. "For all we know," He sneered, "He could be an Eniri exiled for the exact reason that he had not

the pride of their people; the reason why he could steep so low and scavenge the clothes of a damned lurker."

"Look at his face, he can't possibly be a native." One of the men argued; this one the burliest of them all, almost looking like he could stop a charging bull if he wanted.

Curious, Kai inspected all the councilmembers.

The elderly people showed no affixes to their names, however, the young warriors were different.

[Alark Molnae - Bone Refinement]

[Orel Kendrum - Bone Refinement]

[Illiandri Fain - Bone Refinement]

Compared to the people who had **Skin Hardening** as an affix, they had **Bone Refinement**.

*What did that mean? How was it different from **Skin Hardening**...?* Kai wondered, ever more curious to figure out how he might be able to acquire the same.

Although he couldn't find out what it meant for certain, one thing remained clear as Kai could feel a distinct difference in these three battle-hardened warriors compared to Elyn and the others; a sense of danger - like he was facing a wild beast that could attack at any moment.

Kai was rarely ever one to feel threatened by a single person back home, regardless of size, but these three people made his hair stand on end, but simultaneously also making his unbridled battle lust rear its ugly head.

"Maybe he was born deformed." The elderly woman who sided with Elder Mala interjected and cut off Kai's train of thought.

"I highly doubt it." The warrior named Orel said.

Suddenly breaking the arguing, the kid whose name Kai had already forgotten said, stepped forward. "I support Elder Mala's and Elder Nonen's proposal."

"Brat! Stay out of the matters of the adults." One of the six councilmen named Alark, causing the kid to inflate just like he did with Elyn back when he tried to impress her. Even both the elders he tried to stand behind seemed to have scorn in their eyes as they looked at the young boy.

All this caused him to turn into a beet as his cheeks flushed with embarrassment, eliciting not only a muffled chuckle from Kai, but also the two lackeys at his side.

But with a scathing glare from him that turned both boys pale, they quickly shut up and started looking everywhere but at him.

Does this kid have no situational awareness? Kai wondered internally after seeing this kid's repeated failures. He couldn't do anything without making a fool of himself. Although it was quite humorous, and Kai loved nothing more than to watch jackasses like him continuously embarrass themselves, he was almost starting to get worried for him.

-Almost...

"What's all this ruckus about?" A deep and rumbling voice said, suddenly turning the atmosphere of the room a whole degree tenser.

Silence reigned, the only sound the foot steps of a large and well-built middle-aged man as he walked past the council members and took the empty seat at the head of the hearth.

Looking at him, Kai could instantly see the look of a man who had been through a lot. Scars from weapons and beasts could be spotted on his flesh, muscles that told of great strength, a stern expression on his handsome and gruff face, and an air of unmistakable danger around him; not only causing Kai to want to fight him as his blood boiled at having a strong opponent but also run as his instincts screamed of death.

It seemed that Kai's battle lust didn't go unnoticed by the man, as he suddenly scrutinized him with a piercing gaze before nodding approvingly.

"He's not of any of the tribes, I'm certain of it. We do not unjustly execute people who merely try to survive alone in the bogs, and I believe I see some potential in this runt."

"B-but-" Elder Mala tried to interject reluctantly.

"Mala! What is the meaning of being chief, if I don't have the last say - huh?!" He bellowed, cutting off the now very startled elder. It was clear that this man had dealt with Elder Mala's personality before, so his fuse was very short when it came to him.

Intrigued by this gruff man, Kai inspected him.

[Urok Fain - Muscle Strengthening]

Muscle Strengthening? Kai once again wondered, trying to make heads or tails of all the information that his **[Interface]** was feeding him. It was clear that there must be some kind of order to these affixes, and it wasn't hard for Kai to order them like this; **Skin Hardening**, **Bone Refinement**, and **Muscle Strengthening** ordered after which he believed to be the strongest.

Matching these affixes to his **[Interface]**, he knew that there had to be some correlation to the information in **[Bodytype]** as under **[Augments]** as similar order was listed; **Skin**, **Bone**, **Muscle**. However, the list went on, with **Flesh** and then **Mind** as the last.

This was all very intriguing to him, and he couldn't wait to learn more about it.

"Chief, as much as I don't want to see a young one die like that, who's going to supervise, feed, and house him? We can't simply let an unknown youngster run around our tribe without knowing if he'd in the future cause our people harm." Alark said.

The chief moved to respond, but before he could, an old and grandmotherly voice sounded out.

"I'll take him."