

Chapter 16 – “Hunter or the Hunted?”

Crouching low, a group of figures stalked through the bog of the swamps. In the lead was the group leader, Hedric, a 1st-stage warrior and veteran of the warriors.

[Hedric Mo'ra - Skin Hardening]

Behind him, were the crouched forms of Kai, Elyn, and three other **Skin Hardening** rookies. Kai was the only one who wasn't a warrior out of them all, which was rather uncommon as nobody who hadn't achieved at least the first stage wasn't allowed to go out hunting at the evening hours, right before dusk.

But since Kai had more than proven himself capable, easily beating Arek and Elyn, who should have a definite and unquestionable advantage against him, he had been allowed to go out prematurely by Alark. But it also hadn't been before Kai had gone up against the stout warrior himself.

Surprisingly enough, Kai managed to put up a decent fight against the stupidly strong man, even though Kai was still feeling sore in the places where he had blocked some of the man's attacks, Alark had been impressed by his initial performance.

Kai was shocked by the sheer amount of power laying within Alark's body. The warrior clearly also had more experience in life and death battles than Kai, with him having to survive in the swamps while also being a decade older than Kai and all.

But even so, it was much to the astonishment of the others that Kai could hold his ground against Alark better than any 1st-stage warrior could - well, in hand to hand combat that is.

As such, Kai had been set in a group with Elyn to go hunt some game. Originally, Kai was very confused as to why they mentioned 'game' seeing as the swamps had been practically barren of any large mammals or of the sort from what Kai had experienced.

But after having been informed how Elyn and her group actually found him, he quickly became aware of how poor his hunting and survival skills were. Practically non-existent.

It apparently wasn't so that there weren't any mammals and large creatures other than the Knucklehead Toads. There was actually plenty of animals to hunt, it had just been because Kai was about as stealthy as a tip-toeing elephant.

By scaring away any and all animals before he could even find them, it wasn't surprising anymore that he hadn't seen any as of yet, not including the already hunted beaver-like creatures the Elyn and her previous group had found.

As to why they had chosen to hunt in the evening, a time very dangerous as it was right before the beasts of the night wandered out, that was because it was also prime hunting time.

All the prey was going to their dens and hiding places to wait out the night seeing as they couldn't stay out at night. But it was also at this time they were the most active, easiest to find, and ripe for the picking.

Following the wailing noises of some creature, we finally came upon our quarry.

Stumbling along the side of a pond, an injured animal that looked like a dark-furred boar tried to move along the bank.

[Swamp Boar]

Smiling gleefully, Kai pulled forth his bow as he remembered the mouth-watering stew that granny Eri cooked whenever Swamp Boar was available in the tribe.

But before he could knock an arrow from the quiver holstered at his hip, Kai felt Elyn grabbing tight around his wrist.

"Stop, it's a trap." She whispered, barely audible but it was more than enough to make him freeze in his tracks.

The promise of the savory stew had been too much for his overly gluttonous self, so he hadn't noticed the blaring red flags about the situation.

"Slavers?" Kai asked, matching her low voice.

"No, this is a beast." Hedric answered for Elyn.

"A beast?" Kai queried confusedly. "How do you know?"

"Look closely, those wounds are not of arrows or weapons, but claws. And big ones at that." He whispered back, eyes still peeled on the boar. "One of the night creatures seems to have come out early to hunt other predators by laying bait."

Looking wide-eyed at the group leader, Kai tried to imagine what would've happened if he had stumbled upon this scene before meeting the Orak tribe and gotten this warning. That thought gave Kai a small shudder.

But as Kai waited for Hedric's lead, he became confused as the warrior simply stayed put, even though a ferocious predator could be lurking close.

Seeing my questioning gaze, Hedric groaned inwardly as Kai didn't have a shred of hunting experience in the swamps and had to constantly teach him the basics from the ground up. The only redeeming fact about the young man was that he was a bright fellow and handy in any combat situation.

"If we've gotten this close, we might've already been discovered by the beast." He explained. "But if we move to retreat now, it's almost guaranteed that it will spot us and could possibly prompt it to attack. Our best bet is to wait and hope another will take our place instead of having to fight our way out."

As if answering Hedric's words like a miracle, the sound of something ahead of the group caught everybody's attention. There, an emaciated brown wolf could be seen slowly approaching the now shrieking boar as it also caught sight of the predator.

"It's alone, it's too emaciated to be part of a pack." Hedric explained with a whisper.

Watching intently, Kai watched the ever-approaching wolf, until a huge scaly figure suddenly launched itself from the thick underbrush opposite to his group.

Dark emerald scales, a long thick tail, slitted reptilian eyes, a maw of serrated teeth dripping with saliva, and doubling the size of the wolf, the huge lizard that sprung on the emaciated creature wholly stunned Kai as he stared wide-eyed at the scene.

A pained yelp was elicited as the quickly back-pedaling wolf tried to get out of harm's way but simply wasn't quick enough, the huge reptilian biting deep into the wolf's side.

Baffled at the monstrous appearance of our would-be predator, I barely had time to react before I felt a rough tugging on my tunic.

"Run!" Hedric hissed in a whispered manner with his course voice.

Not needing to be told twice, Kai sprinted after the two others who had already turned to run. Kai spared the massive lizard a single scrutinizing glance before it disappeared out of sight.

Running through the swamps with no real direction, the only thought on Kai's and the other's mind was to make space between the lizard and them.

Stopping their mad dash ten minutes later, the group rested in a small clearing.

"So, that was one of those night beasts?" Kai asked, breaking the silence as the others slowly regained their breath.

"Yeah, and one of those nasty lizards... with their damned poisonous fanged-filled maws..." Elyn muttered. "It must've come out early to set up a trap and hunt. Although it's rare something like this happens, it does occasionally."

"But it was actually pretty damn close to our hiding place, it must've had already spotted us, if not smelled us," I stated. "But then why didn't it attack us?"

"It's a clever bastard, and it clearly recognized that it couldn't take on our group without harm to itself," Alark explained. "That's why we stayed put until something else would take our place, else we might've roused it to preemptively strike in worry of letting potential prey get away."

"I see..." Kai nodded, shuddering with trepidation but also badly hidden battle hunger at the prospects of fighting such large and ferocious beasts who were actually that intelligent.

Leaning against a tree, Kai absently minded watched Elyn as she fished out the mud that had gotten into her leather boots during their sprint. But as his senses were still more than primed after having had the encounter with the overgrown lizard, the snapping of a twig cut straight through to his mind.

Whipping his gaze in the direction of the sound, Kai's heart dropped and his body surged with adrenalin yet again for another round as he saw six figures decked out leather armor, weapons drawn. But what caught Kai's notice specifically was their various odd skin colors which instantly sparked the memory of where granny Eri had told him about the swamp's slave traders.

The demonkin!

As Kai saw the bow with a knocked arrow pointed directly in the direction of both him and the still wholly unaware Elyn picking away at the mud in her boot, his mind shot into overdrive and he kicked off the tree he was leaning against.

"Wha-? Aehh!"

Lunging at Elyn, she barely noticed Kai before he slammed into her, eliciting a yelp. Before they had even fallen to the ground, red hot searing pain exploded in his shoulder as something very fast and sharp pierced through Kia's flesh.

He could only grunt as he rammed into her like a battering ram, crashing down to the ground with her in a tackle and forgetting the pain in the heat of the moment.

Elyn was only dazed for less than a split second before moving to shout at Kai, but he beat her to it.

"SLAVERS!" He turned and shouted, alarming the others, only to see another arrow hurl through the air and with a dull thud embed itself in the throat of one of the 1st-stage warrior rookies.

Falling into the ground in a half-wheeze and a half-gurgle, the kid's fate was set in stone as he sputtered helplessly. First to react, as per his station, Hedric sprung into motion, dashing to bring the other two rookie warriors to cover.

Elyn's fury of being knocked down by me quickly turned to shocked realization and then settled into firm determination. Moving with me, we got to cover as well, but the demonkin wasn't going to wait as Kai heard somebody call out.

"Don't you dare kill them all this time!" The unknown voice bellowed. "We'll still need to bring some back, else the quartermaster will be pissed."

Hissing in pain, Kai hadn't expected Elyn to suddenly break off the arrow shaft embedded in his shoulder, but he was grateful for it nonetheless.

He simply gave her a curt nod of thanks, then they got to their feet, taking shelter behind the large trunk of a tree as they could hear the footsteps of their assailants come ever closer.

Before taking shelter, Kai had already managed to gauge their power with the helpful **[Interface]**, and they were all at the 1st warrior stage which made the situation much less dire if they had to face something like a 2nd-stage.

Sharing a gaze with Hedric who huddled together with the other two warrior rookies behind a tree trunk of their own, Kai lifted his hands, displaying three fingers, the intent clear.

Listening closely to the approaching footsteps, Kai counted down, the universal gesture easy for the others to understand with Hedric simply nodding in agreement and getting the attention of the other warriors behind him.

3...

The footsteps and sounds of the mud being displaced grew more hesitant the close they came.

2...

Drawing his dagger, Kai clenched his fist tightly around the shaft, unbound excitement coursing through his adrenaline-fueled body even though he was facing a dire situation.

1...

Without any precursor or battlecry, Kai's group suddenly charged out of their covers, taking two of the closest demonkin completely off-guard from the unexpected retaliation.

Charging the demonkin, Kai kept track of the two archers in the back, placing himself right between the closest demonkin and the bowman, using him as an impromptu shield cover.

Kai nimbly avoided the hastily thrown slash of the demonkin's shortsword, slashing out with his dagger, aiming for the demonkin's face. Scrambling back to dodge the slash with fear of being hit, the demonkin almost stumbled on the uneven ground beneath his feet.

Noticing the swoosh of an arrow being loosed and thudding into the tree trunk that Kai and Elyn had just used for cover, Kai capitalized on the opportunity.

Taking advantage of the demonkin's footing being off as he stumbled, Kai managed to land a deep sinew-cutting gash on his hand, causing him to drop his weapon.

However, instead of going in for the kill, Kai simply rushed past the wailing demonkin, allowing Elyn who had been right behind him to care of the enemy.

He charged at the now desperate-looking archer who seeming was also the leader of the demonkin.

Another two sword-wielding demonkin moved to intercept though, but true to his status as a veteran, Hedric came bulldozing into the two demonkin who were now scrambling to put up a defense and ward off his onslaught.

"N-no!" The bowman quivered, seeing the bestial human locking eyes on him with those maddeningly predatory eyes of his.

There was something not right with this human...

The uncanny bestial lust and hunger that lingered in those predatorial eyes threw the battle-hardened leader for a rollercoaster of terror, as not even the most of ferocious beasts he had seen in his lifetime would've been able to match it.

Now completely unhindered, Kai quickly closed the distance and rammed his dagger up the stunned archer's jaw and into his brain, causing blood to spurt over Kai's predatory grin. He himself only received a small cut on his arm from a hastily drawn dagger, so Kai didn't halt his momentum and charged at the second archer who looked equally as terrified.

However scared, this bowman already had an arrow knocked.

Kai's eyes turned into pinpricks as they called for murder, the kill he had just made fueling his desire for victory and carnage to a fever pitch. As time moved to a standstill, Kai's eyes darted to focus on the hand holding back the arrow on the string.

The instant he saw the finger move to release, he twisted his torso and took the arrow in his shoulder, barely an inch from where he already been shot and where the previous arrowhead was still buried. But Kai didn't even utter a sound as the battle lust completely overrode the pain now flaring in his shoulder like a bonfire.

Meeting the same fate as the leader, the last demonkin archer was tackled and quickly found himself sputtering for air as his throat was sliced open.

With the bowmen and the leader taken out of the equation, the three other demonkin quickly fell to the same fate under the combined efforts of the group.

Standing over the corpses of his enemies, Kai relished in the ecstasy of their life and death victory. It was only by embracing and facing death that you could truly value life. And at that moment, Kai had never felt more alive.

Deep down inside him, within the self that was Kai, the insatiable hunger crooned like a contented beast.

For now...