

Chapter 11 - "Grandma Eri"

As everybody turned their gazes towards the voice, silence once again permeated throughout the hall.

Sitting by the head of the tribe, was the figure of an old grandmotherly woman; clearly the oldest one present. But contrary to her aged appearance, the poise with that she held herself and the glint of vigor in her blue eyes made her stand out compared to the other oldtimers.

Kai only knew her as one of the six councilmembers, but during all the arguing and bickering, she hadn't even uttered a word - well, until now that is.

"Elder Eri, you can't take this one... you're an elder, and what if he-" Alark said worriedly.

"Grandma Eri has spoken," Chief Urok said abruptly, cutting Alark off with an unwavering and absolute gaze. "And so it will be."

It was with a surprising amount of fervor that he spoke, his words unmovable like a mountain. It was more than clear for Kai that this chief held great respect for the wily old woman after seeing this.

"Thank you, little Urok." She said smilingly, patting the huge man on the bicep as if she was praising her favorite grandson and not a battle-scarred warrior chieftain.

However, surprisingly enough, none of the council members seemed to neither mind nor think this action unusual, which caused Kai to wonder exactly what the whole dynamic here was.

"Then, this meeting is adjourned." The chief said, getting to his feet.

Standing there, Kai was a bit stumped about what to do. He had just been a spectator to a trial conducted about him without having been able to say or do anything in the matter, leaving him now rather lost.

"Gekeke - come here child, no use just standing there and catching flies." Elder Eri cackled mirthfully as she saw his stupor.

As the door shut behind him, Kai gazed curiously around at the various pots and pans, herbs, tools, and many other haphazardly placed items decorating Elder Eri's home.

Walking past Kai, Elder Eri moved about with surprising agility for her age, moving various urns and herbs around. She picked up a few tools and what looked like ointments, then waddled over to a bench; promptly plopping down on it.

"Well, come on now child," She said beckoning Kai forth with an encouraging hand. "Let's tend to that infection."

Looking down at his bandaged leg, he was rather confused as to what she meant as he had already checked the wound for any infection after having gotten the use of his hands back, but there wasn't any.

"No child, not your leg - your arm." She said like she was talking to a toddler, even though Kai was well over twenty.

Redirecting his gaze from his leg to his arm, sure enough, the thin line of a shallow wound could be seen. It wasn't clear at first, but looking closely, you could already faintly see some infected tissue in certain places around the wound, stunning Kai as it was something that he hadn't even noticed before now.

But the old woman had...

Stumbling over to the woman, as his leg still wasn't in any shape to properly support on, he sat down beside her.

It was without warning that she suddenly poured a foul stinking liquid over the small wound, turning the pain from a slight itch to as if he had just been set on fire.

The pain made rubbing pure alcohol on a wound seem like it rather soothed pain than sterilize. Whatever it was she had just administered the wound, it burned like a motherfucker.

"Mmph." He grunted, holding in a howl of pain.

"Good," The elderly lady said, nodding to herself. "It seems that you can handle a bit of pain."

Using a sharp metal tool, she began scraping away at the infected tissue. Although this was also painful, it didn't hurt nearly as much as what she had just done did, and besides, Kai had gone through much - *much* worse before.

"So, it would seem that you had an encounter with an Eniri archer, hmm?" She said all of a sudden, making Kai tense up.

He wasn't sure what the dynamic was between these people who have taken him in and the ones called the Eniri, but as Kai had killed one less than a day ago, he didn't want to find out by them sentencing him to execution for committing a crime.

"What do you mean?" Kai asked confusedly, trying to seem like he didn't know what she was talking about. But the sudden swat on the still sore and tender flesh around his arm, proved that to be the wrong move.

Meeting her stern gaze, she said angrily. "Don't play coy with me boy."

Winching as he rubbed the pained spot on his arm, Kai realized that she must already, for some uncanny reason, have known what happened.

"Sigh - Yes... but how did you know? Is the wound infected or poisoned from their arrows or something?" He asked curiously.

Returning to her grandmotherly old self as if nothing had even happened, she gave him a smile.

"No - the Eniri would never resort to something as poison; their pride is simply too high for such underhanded things." She said shaking her head, causing grey locks of hair to spill over her shoulders. "But the fact that your wound had taken on a specific kind of infection made it rather clear."

"What do you mean?" Kai interjected curiously only to receive yet another swat.

"Don't interrupt me when I'm speaking, you impatient boy. Have you no manners?" She grumbled.

Rubbing the now very sore spot, Kai gave her an apologetic "Sorry..."

"In the Eniri's territory," Tisking, she continued. "They have an abundance of rocks, stones, and flint which all incidentally are of a material that induces rapid infection to flesh when coming in contact with something like an open wound."

"It won't kill you by itself, but it will severely weaken you if left untreated."

"I see..." Kai mumbled to himself, thinking over what she had just said.

"But - the Eniri-made arrowhead hidden within your palm is also quite the indicator." She said simply, once again catching Kai off-guard.

"Calm down boy - you're not in trouble." She said shaking her head like she was trying to cajole a scared animal.

"As an Eniri would never run from a fight, it isn't hard to imagine who emerged as the survivor. Although we are not enemies with the Eniri, we are not friends either. You must've been attacked due to your clothing, having been mistaken as a lurker - and I can't fault yourself for fighting back." She said calmly, deflating Kai's worry like a balloon.

Putting the arrowhead on top of the nearby table, Kai sighed. He was astounded by this old woman's cunning and wiliness, as it was rather rare for someone like Kai to be on a backfoot when handling people.

It was after a few moments of silence as he watched her do her work that Kai asked. "I never really got to ask, but what is a lurker?"

"Hmm... you really are an outsider..." She said to herself, shaking her head with dubiety as she began using some ointment on the now cleaned wound. "You said that you didn't remember anything, right?"

"Indeed... I have no knowledge of before or how I got here..." Kai lied.

She scrutinized Kai's gaze for a few seconds, seemingly searching for something before returning to her work.

"Fine - I'll tell you." She sighed. "In these swamps, there is a total of three different human factions."

'Human' factions... does that imply there are non-human factions?!... Kai wondered, a bit stunned. But now knowing not to interject while the capricious grandma was speaking, Kai kept it to himself for now.

"The Eniri, a collection of prideful zealots to the deity of the swamps and most numerous of the three." She continued. "The Orak, which would be us. And lastly, the Lurkers, a despicable bunch of individuals."

"Us humans have to survive and struggle against the swamps and the dangers that it throws at us," She continued. "However, beasts and food are the least of our problems."

She pointed out a window, indicating the wild swamps beyond the fortification walls.

"Out there, the real monsters lie. They specifically hunt humans and use them for slaves. Where they send our people after capture, we don't know. But one thing is for certain; none ever return." She spat, a surprising amount of hatred in the old woman's voice.

Seeing an opening, Kai asked. "I assume, these are not humans... right?"

"Yes, although they resemble humans, they are not." She said. "There are two kinds. A sinister race that can mostly be distinguished by their wide array of skin colors, be it red, grey, or coal black - those deprived monsters are the worst to be captured by. Then there is the other race of horned and scaly monsters, whose physical strength and resilience is not to be underestimated."

Seeing that Kai was listening intently, she continued.

"We don't know much about them, other than rudimentary information." She explained. "Their factions are called The Demonic Slave Emporium and The Draconic Slave Caravan; their only purpose in these swamps are to capture and enslave humans. Luckily for us, the two are in a perpetual war against each other. While they think of us humans as lower beings, like animals and livestock, the hatred and despise they hold for each other is on a whole other level. "

She sighed. "If not for that fact, I believe that our fickle balance between all the factions would've been long destroyed, bringing the swamps to ruin."

"Why?" Kai asked seeing that she was done tending to his bandages. "I realize that I don't know all the details, but that seems like an awful lot to go through just to get some slaves. Is there any specific reason?"

"None that we know off..." She sighed. "One day, a very long time ago, before even I can remember, they simply appeared here; and ever since we've been in an endless struggle

against them. No matter how many we kill or maim, at some point or another, they end up receiving new reinforcements to keep the cycle of robbing humans going."

"I see... but *what* exactly are they? I mean, if not humans, then what?" He asked curiously.

"They call themselves Demonkin and Dragonkin; blasted creatures." She answered.

Nodding, Kai mulled through all the information that he had just gotten. It would appear that he had been dropped straight into an untamed swamp inhabited by monstrous beasts, both friendly and hostile humans, and humanoid-ish slave traders.

Well... she definitely wasn't lying when she said that there would be more hardships in this life... Kai thought to himself, thinking back at his encounter with that dubious goddess.

Seeing Kai's silence, Elder Eri took it as him having no more questions so she continued.

"That brings us to why Lurkers are considered the traitors of humanity." She said, the hint of animosity in her wisened voice not escaping his notice. "They're humans that have aligned themselves with the slave-traders. The brands you see under their collarbones are put there by the Demonkin and the Dragonkin as soon as they're able to walk, allowing them to roam unhindered and without the worry of becoming a slave."

"Then what do the slave-traders get in return?" Kai asked, brought out of his thoughts.

"They help to capture and give information away about humans." She said. "Although the two slave-trading races are at odds with each other, the Lurkers cater to both sides."

"Truly a fickle balance we have..." She muttered exhaustingly.

"Thank you Elder Eri for teachi-" Kai was about to thank her, but out of the blue, received a third swat.

"That's Grandma Eri to you!" She croaked, seemingly very offended that Kai used formality. "I take you into my home and take care of you, and you don't have the decency to at least that, huh?"

Staring wide-eyed at the overly capricious elderly woman, Kai surprisingly enough found himself smiling genuinely.

"I'm very sorry Grandma Eri, I won't make that mistake again," Kai said, bowing at the waist to the now smirking woman. "Thank you for your hospitality."

"Good - Good, and don't you forget it!" She cackled.

Finishing bandaging up his arm, she got to her feet.

"Now take off your clothes."

"Huh?" Kai murmured, eyes going wide.