

## Chapter 25 – “A Quatermaster's Furor”

In the perpetual gloom of the night, the chirping of critters died down to allow for the awakening roars of the night beasts. However, in a particular part of the dark and humid swamps, the sounds of those exact same powerful and vicious creatures died down too, giving way for the ominous creaking of wooden wheels and the plowing of the swampy mud being displaced.

In the ever-darkening twilight of surroundings, one sight was superimposed upon everything else.

Glowing lights spilled their soft radiance on the gnarled trees and elected onto the muddy ponds. Passing through-hardened inroads and the many swamp oaks lining the bog, a precession of large wooden wagons and carriages could be seen steadily traveling through the Southern Swamps.

With lanterns, the clanging of metal cages, and the large bulky beasts pulling the haphazard-looking caravan, it was no surprise that even the night beasts dared not attack and left the menacing sight be.

That was the way of the Draconic Slave Caravan after all as their base of operations were never in one place for more than half a fortnight.

Come morning, the precession settled down, and the before ominous silence was broken by the boisterous voices of Dragonkin loitering about, setting up camp.

Within one of these massive carriages, a large figure could be seen sitting behind a desk, sorting out papers and doing various other menial tasks that he needed done as the leader of this motley gathering of thugs and thieves.

Darneth Forace was a stout and militant man, large frame built to fight battles, and rightly so seeing as he had previously been a highly respected officer of the kingdom's army. Although he had never held any high warrior-forging stage, being stuck at the third stage, Darneth had always managed to somehow garner respect amongst his peers.

However, after his fall from honor and glory when it had been discovered that he was a crucial piece in the smuggling of contraband into the army, Darneth was quickly shunned from the army and inducted into more than an entire decade of imprisonment. Then exiled and thrown to the aimless thugs, Darneth turned to the only well-paying job still available for a strong but dirty warrior.

A slave quatermaster.

This was already a great tarnish to his self-esteem and image, so when he had been sent out into the boonies of the swamps, he had rightly been even more infuriated by this development. But seeing as he wouldn't be able to keep this job if he were to deny the orders of the higherups and he had nowhere else to turn, the militant Dragonkin warrior could only assent.

The prospect of enslaving mere humans left a bad taste in his mouth as they were barely considered more than animals and livestock after all. They were only good for cleaning the dishes and a good thrashing, both in the bed and out. But even so, mating with a human was practically seen as borderline bestiality in the eyes of the people, something that even those decrepit Demonkin over the border could agree on.

But whenever something was wholly in short order and forbidden, there would always those who were depraved and rich enough to pay for it. As such, this illicit niche of slave-trading was rather lucrative, even despite all the lengths the slave caravan had to go through to simply get them rounded up, captured, and then transported all the way back to the kingdom.

And now, after so many wasted years as quartermaster which he had lost track of, the sudden urging of the upper brass of the Slave Caravan to push for more slaves and the total dominance in the swamps gave Darneth mixed emotions.

On one hand, this would mean having to risk his own life and just that much more work to do around here, but on the other, this could also finally mean the end of his serving term out in this damnable human branch of the Slave Caravan.

But the problem still remained that the humans were essentially like cockroaches, and they liked to bite back whenever they tried to get them shackled. Darneth simply couldn't waltz into their territory and take over as both of those clans also had a third-stage warrior each like himself. And even though Darneth was confident in his ability to take either out with a pure difference in not strength but skill, the fact remained that the cost of warriors and resources in doing so would leave his caravan crippled and weak - ripe for the Demonkin to pick.

And Darneth would be damned if he would ever let those bastards have the satisfaction.

As such, due to the increasing demands from back at headquarters, Darneth had sent a request for reinforcements as he otherwise would not be able to meet their status quo. But whether or not that request would be accepted was still up for debate as there hadn't been any words since sending the letter.

But just as Darneth dipped his quill into the bottle of ink to his side and began writing on the latest parchment detailing the caravan's *wares*, the sudden intrusion of a figure bursting into the carriage caused him to flinch involuntarily. The signature he had so meticulously attempted to write was now ruined by an inky streak across the lettering and multiple other lines.

"Boss! Boss! We've just gotten word that..." The agitated party manager exclaimed before suddenly cutting himself off as he saw the quill in the quartermaster's hand snap in two.

Turning even paler from what he had just previously been, the party manager, Krill, stuttered incomprehensibly.

"WHAT IS IT?!" Darneth bellowed all of a sudden, reaching his boiling point from one to a hundred in the blink of an eye.

"I-I..." Krill stuttered helplessly in the face of his superior's unexpected fury.

But seeing that this was going nowhere as Darneth simply stared him down, it was up to the now very pissed quartermaster himself to calm his anger. Taking in a deep breath of air and offering a small prayer to the goddess of mercy to save him from these imbeciles who worked under him, Darneth managed to visibly calm down.

"What-is-it-Krill?" Darneth ground out between clenched teeth, attempting to see if he could save the parchment he had been writing on. "Has headquarters finally sent a message back?"

Calming considerably as he now wasn't directly in the presence of what just before had looked in a wrathful beast ready to pounce, Krill attempted to straighten his stature and gather his rambling thoughts.

"T-the squad that hadn't returned on t-time from the pick-up..." Krill paused, his tall figure and lanky posture giving way to his nervousness. "They've been found... d-dead, sir..."

Darneth found himself inexplicably wanting to jump and strangle the scraggy man, but through sheer force of will, suppressed that desire.

"You tell me... that an entire squad, *with* a 2nd-stage warrior - has been completely wiped out?" Darneth spoke slowly through clenched teeth.

"Y-yes... sir..." Krill hesitantly added.

The sudden fist that slammed into the desk Darneth had been sitting behind took Krill completely off-guard, splinters and papers flying everywhere as the polished wood was completely destroyed by the quartermaster's single slam of furor.

"WHO DID THIS!?" He bellowed, madness in his eyes.

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"Those damned fucking mutts..." Kai cursed with a wince. "I'm beginning to think I should've just tried my luck with that 2nd-stage warrior and his goons..."

Propping himself up against the mossy cave wall, he sighed expansively.

Although Kai had successfully stopped his ever-deteriorating body from dying, his wounds were anything but healed. The life essence and the death essence that he had just previously absorbed had done nothing more than to somehow just keep him alive. As such, his wounds were still very much grizzly and would inevitably invite a host of deadly problems if he didn't get them checked and tended to in the foreseeable future.

But now left on his own, crippled of proper movement, and facing death that would ensue if his mangled body was left unattended, Kai grimaced. By all means, his situation was beyond dire. But it was at that point, staring into the ceiling of the cave with an exhausted and pain-filled expression, that Kai remembered a certain snippet of information.

He distinctly recalled Nid'sunr mentioning that the reason why the wolves had contained such potent essence within their bodies had been because of their habitat. This cave, in fact. One apparently filled with herbs and essence.

Centering his mind on his surroundings, doing his best to tune out the pain of his mauled body, Kai attempted to feel the air caressing his skin.

He was right on the money!

As the tingling sensation of essence was touching his skin, Kai could distinctly notice that the ambient essence in the air of this cave was definitely more potent than what was outside. That led to another surprising revelation as he pulled up the progression towards his first stage window.

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[Your body has absorbed the life essence of another being and furthered the progression towards your first **Body Transformation** stage]

[Progression to the next stage: 51%  $\Rightarrow$  63%]

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This was what he had been greeted with after eating almost half that wolf. Although the increase had been expected, there was something odd about the numbers. That was because the last time he checked, right before leaving the tribe with his hunting group yesterday, his progress had only been 49%, not 51%.

That would imply that he had gained two percent progress from seemingly out of nowhere. Then the question remained, had he unknowingly absorbed essence ever since starting to cultivate, or had this been an effect of simply being in the cave for this long? Or maybe, this was because of an entirely different third reason...

Whatever it was, it was a delightful piece of information that he needn't forcefully inject his body with essence to further its progress towards the next stage.

Nevertheless, this wasn't the time to be thinking about cultivation as Kai was still in peril's way. But if there were herbs within this cave, then there might just still be hope for him.

As such, Kai fought against the pain and exhaustion, crawling closer to the moss-covered interior of the cave. It quite dark in the cave, so it wasn't a surprise that he hadn't noticed

anything before, but the closer he looked, and the longer he went into the cave's depths, the more herbs came to light.

Some were either well hidden in the gloom of the cave, while others blended in with the moss, not only using it for protection but also sustenance to fuel their own growth.

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[Swampwrack]

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"Jackpot!" Kai hooted, but only before wincing as his wounds protested at the sudden outburst.

While Kai had spent most of his time doing tough and menial work on the tribe during his process of gaining their trust, he had also diligently read through granny Eri's herbal books and notes, accumulating an, although small, general comprehensive knowledge of most of the herbs that could be found here in the swamps, their properties, and how to make use of them.

Most of the herbs that grew inside this cave were discovered to be mostly for miscellaneous or purely cultivational uses as Kai hobbled on from next to next, but this [Swampwrack] had been exactly the type of herb he had been wishing to find.

It held magnificent pain-dulling and healing properties, and making this into a paste would make for a good healing ointment when applied to his wounds. Although there wasn't much from the initial cluster he found, it was just enough.

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[Hyldethyme]

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Another great find. This made for a decent disinfectant and was normally used for warding away the sickness that the swamps could bring, but it would suffice for Kai's current purposes.

Other than that, there wasn't much else that could be used to help his wounds heal. There was a huge abundance of herbs in the cave, but most saw only use in cultivation for Kai.

Kai ignored the greedy thoughts, telling him to immediately starting to gather all these herbs as they would undoubtedly allow him to achieve the 1st Body **Transformation** stage, if not even catapult him all the way to the 2nd-stage too. However, they weren't going to do him any good if he was dead, so he got on with preparing the herbs to be applied to his ever-worsening wounds.

The [**Swampwrack**] just needed water, mortar, and a pistil before it could be utilized on almost any wound. But seeing as he had none of the three, Kai simply opted for using his mouth as an impromptu pistil and mortar. Using his saliva as a substitute for water.

The only problem with using this method was that [**Swampwrack**] was quite a potent herb, especially since it had high essence contents.

Making it into a paste within the confines of your body would mean letting much of its essence seeps directly into your body. This was something that could turn out disastrous if you were to absorb too much essence. Especially if you weren't even a warrior, to begin with. Essentially, this way of preparing the herbs was very much like when Kai used the brazen method of drinking the essence permeated water of his herb bath.

As the mouthful of [**Swampwrack**] had turned into a proper goey paste, Kai could feel his mind turning woozy from not only the herb's medicinal potency but also the essence flooding his body. Ignoring the messages of his increase of progression towards his next **Body Transformation** stage, Kai got on with preparing the herbs.

After about two hours, Kai had finished with all the herbs. But as a result of how he did so, he was now feeling beyond light-headed and delirious. He had even passed out for a whole hour during the process, but managed to stay somewhat coherent throughout most of the time.

The other miscellaneous medicinal herbs had also been mixed to make an outer layer of ointment to protect the healing process by rolling them into balls and chewing on them until they turned out how he wanted them.

So now, it was just a waiting game.

Kai had to remain as still and as well-nourished as possible to let his body regain enough strength to allow him to get home. So by feasting on the remains of the other wolf for the next two nights, and spending most of his time tending to his wounds, he got by without tapping out.

He did briefly wonder why he hadn't been assaulted by the night beasts as of yet, but could only attribute it to either the fact that this den still held the stench of this pack of wolves or that the putrid stench of the corpse whose death essence Kai had robbed was still stinking up the surrounding.

Maybe it was a little bit of both...

But whatever it was, Kai could only be thankful for it. He was rather defenseless in his current state after all, so any more beasts coming to take a bite out of him sounded less than ideal.

"And here I was... thinking I was a dog person..." Kai muttered self-deprecatingly, glancing at the half-eaten, and now fly-infested corpses.