

Chapter 7 – “Creatures of the Night”

Sitting in front of a small fire, eating a roasted toad leg, was the bedraggled figure of Kai.

He was worse for wear, his clothes tattered, mud and blood staining the grey of his long-sleeved shirt brown. Currently, he was gorging on the leg of the third Knucklehead Toad that he had hunted and killed himself.

It had been about four days since he was dropped in these gods-forsaken swamps, and while he definitely couldn't eat a whole toad for each day that had gone by, as there were more than enough meat to go around on a single one of those overgrown amphibians, they all, unfortunately, went bad before he could even eat a fourth of their plentiful meat.

Lacking the proper hunting skills with the know-how of curing and preserving meat before the flies and ensuing maggots got to his slain prey meant that he had to continuously find and hunt new toads.

The frogs didn't taste particularly good, but they weren't disgusting either, so with a hungry stomach, they went down quite easily. Although Kai had managed to solve his food problem as the toads were abundant, finding drinkable water was a lot harder and another problem altogether.

While trekking through the bogs of the swamplands, he had found various streams of clear water but was initially too worried about alien bacteria and diseases to ever attempt and drink it. However, after going a full day without finding neither better water nor civilization, he gave up on waiting and drank from the best source he could find.

Trying out his luck instead of succumbing to death by dehydration was readily decided as the best course of action by the end of a tiring day of travel and hunting.

Three full days had gone by since then, and to his delight, he was still perfectly healthy other than some bruises and scratches from mishaps during toad encounters.

By now, he doubted there were any problems with the water, or at least what he had drunk up until now... Although he might be festering some slow and insidious disease, he honestly couldn't do anything about it as he would die anyway if he didn't drink any water at all.

Feasting on the stumpy toad leg in his greasy hands, he thought through what the hell he was going to do. He hadn't found any signs of sapient life yet, and he was seriously starting to worry that he had been dropped off in some desolate world to fend off toads for the rest of his days.

With the glow of the campfire hitting his contemplative expression, he was brought out of his musings by a sudden and air shuddering roar that thundered throughout the swamps.

It was first now that Kai realized how dark it had become, and his face quickly turned pale. Hurridly, he knocked over the small fire and doused it with some viscous swamp mud. Cautiously peering out into the gloom of the late evening darkness, he scanned vigilantly for any movements in the shadows.

He couldn't be sure if it was the paranoia or worry getting to him, but he thought he could see vague shapes moving about the dark foliage, however, nothing did present itself. Not being able to spot any discernable danger, he bolted out from his hiding place and started making his way away from his temporary camp.

In the three days spent surviving in the swamps, if there was anything he had learned, then it was when to hide. As soon as dusk would fall, all the beasts and predators that had been slumbering in their dens would awake from their slumber to hunt.

During the daytime, Kai had only met some overgrown and aggressive toads out for his life, coupled with various large unrecognizable critters, however, as soon it became nighttime, all the hidden beasts within the inconspicuous swamps seemed to all suddenly crawl out of their dwellings, as evident by the dozens of thundering roars now shaking the leaves and rippling the muddy waters right now.

Kai had never managed to see one of these beasts yet, but he did once come within close proximity of one. *Way* too close for his own liking.

He was pretty sure if it hadn't been because the beast was too lazy to hunt him and instead went for the half-roasted toads in his old camp, he would've already been long dead. That was then he learned that he should never have an active fire out during the night whilst simultaneously allowing the roasting smells of flesh saturate the air.

At that point, he was practically begging for the beasts, from far and wide, to come and have a piece of Kai.

The wet squishes of mud being displaced beneath his feet and the swooshing of trees passing him by, accompanied with the occasional bestial roar were the only sounds that registered during Kai's frantic dash as he desperately made his way as far as he could from his abandoned camp.

Running until he was out of breath, Kai made himself scarce. Hiding beneath the marled roots of an old tree, he found himself surprisingly comfortable, aside from the muddy and itchy ground he laid on, consisting mostly of dried twigs and hardened dirt.

With bated breath, he scoured the surroundings for a good thirty minutes.

When he realized that no danger was to be spotted following his mad dash, adrenaline vanished from his body, replaced with fatigue and exhaustion. An involuntary shiver also reminded him that his body was rapidly cooling. Although the air was humid and reasonably warm even in the nights, the perspiration and wet mud sticking to his skin were bringing his temperature down.

Kai could only curse the fact that he had just gotten his fire up and running before having to abandon in it, the temporary camp and dinner with. He spent no small amount of effort just to get the fire started, having no tools and all. But with his ingenuity and experience in having to find sources of heat or making it, he managed to scrounge some extremely dried twigs together, along with what he guessed to be flint.

Although the splintery rocks Kai found seemingly everywhere looked to be flint, he wasn't entirely sure. The main reason for his uncertainty being the rocks' surprising ability to create sparks. It was extremely hard to start a fire with just simple flint and rocks in general, but luckily with these, it was doable with some effort. The few cuts and smatters of ash on his hand proof of that.

However, now hiding underneath an old tree, attempting to wait out the horror-filled night, he was in no position to start a new one. He could only attempt to dry whatever he could with what he had on hand. Getting some sleep-eye was rough, but having lived on the streets for almost half his life, he managed.

The night was long and cold, but Kai got through it alive.

The first step was to get another fire going as soon as dawn arrived, and after an hour or two, he was rested and warmed. He let a tired sigh escape his lips just before setting off, the idea of having to continue the monotonous routine of hunting and searching, building a fire and eating, only to hide one dusk fell, exhausting to his addled mind.

The thick and wet undergrowth of the swamps were as unforgiving as ever, seemingly out hamper the passage of anyone daring enough to attempt. Unfortunately, one such individual didn't have a choice in the matter.

Slushing through mud and brine, Kai was thoroughly pissed off. For how long, he didn't know, but he had been searching for any potential prey to fill his stomach for the day.

However, during this time, he had only managed to encounter a single one of those damnable toads. But just as he thought he needn't worry about food anymore today, the slippery basted actually turned tail and escaped. Only having a sore bruise on his shoulder to tell his troubles, it wasn't surprising that Kai had become incensed and irate.

With time going by, muck and grime started to accumulate on every inch of his body, Kai now having completely given up on trying to stay clean since it simply wasn't worth the effort. As he made his way in search of new prey, he ended up consumed in his own thoughts, so when he stumbled into the cold corpse of a person, he almost fell directly on top of it.

"Gah!" He blurted out in surprise, not immediately realizing that the man before him was already long dead.

Kai had just come to terms with the fact that he might not see other civilization for a good while, maybe even never, and that meant he had to start thinking of permanent solutions to the problems he faced here alone in the swamps.

But like a message sent from the heavens themselves as he attempted to resolve his thoughts, the moment he passed around a particularly large tree that obscured most of his vision, he was met with the cold and dead gaze of a corpse.

Initially, Kai was extremely startled by the scene before him. Although the body was intact and unmarried, blood not anywhere to be seen from the neck down, there wasn't a shred of doubt that the man who laid propped against the large tree was long dead. In his head, where his eye should've been, was simply an empty eye-socket. Or empty might not be the right word, rather gouged.

It wasn't hard to figure out what the offending item to the wound had been, as to his side lay the broken shaft of a wooden arrow.

Both relief and worry surged through Kai's mind at that moment. Relief at the fact that humans, and most likely civilization, existed within this world and was within reach, but worry at the realization that the cause of this man's death was undoubtedly another person.

Rather confident that these Knucklehead Toads didn't have the expertise in utilizing bows and arrows, Kai came to this astute conclusion.

Giving a scanning glance at the surroundings, his gaze scrutinizing, he crouched by the dead man's side. Starting to inspect his wounds and clothes, Kai quickly came to the realization that his original guess was correct and that the man held no valuables or items other than the clothes on his person.

He did however have a sheath made from woven fibers for what looked like a decently sized hunting knife, but it was empty, no doubt been looted already by whoever was his assailer. Even the arrow's tip was nowhere to be seen, probably having been broken in the attempt of the killer to retrieve their arrow from the head of this dead man.

He wasn't worried that the culprit was anywhere nearby though, seeing as the corpse had been dead for at least a few hours. Kai had seen more than his share of dead people in his lifetime, and the temperature and the color of the body turned into easy indications of when and how it had died in the experienced eyes of Kai.

Looking down at his own tattered clothes, barely qualifying for even being called clothing anymore, he sighed and looked back at the dead man's clothes. They were all made from green fibers interwoven with scaly and thin reptilian hides, the pattern and colors very adept at blending in with the surrounding swamplands.

Stripping the man naked, Kai began donning the clothes for himself. It wasn't the first time Kai had looted a corpse, but such moral qualms had never fazed him anyway. The man was dead, and Kai needed the clothes. He of course avoided the less... desirable parts, such as the man's underwear.

Not because he was squeamish about using another man's used garments, but from the fact that the man was dead, and when people die, their dignity was usually never upheld afterward as their bodies would discharge whatever they couldn't hold onto anymore.

He cleaned the small smelly area that had soaked through to the pants in the swamp water, getting most of the nauseating smell away before also putting them on. Patting his new clothes, he was pleasantly surprised to see them fitting rather well on his lean and worn body, only a bit tight around certain areas as the clothes' original owner was somewhat scrawnier than Kai.

Although the man had no items of note on his lifeless body, there was one oddity that drew the attention of Kai as he had been undressing him. Just beneath his collarbone, scar tissue was to be seen. But it wasn't just any normal wound that had healed. It actually looked to be the burn mark of a small brand, the scar detailing the picture of a mangled tree submerged in water, reminding Kai of the surroundings.

He couldn't be sure what it meant, but it obviously had some significance so Kai kept the image stored in his head. Another odd thing of note was the man's features. Although it was slightly troublesome to get an accurate look with him missing an eye and all, it was clear that his ethnicity was completely alien to Kai.

Caucasian, Asian, African-Americans, and so-on. But no, this man didn't fall into any of those he knew off. From what Kai could scrutinize, it seemed that the facial features were much more exotic than usual from a caucasian man, but what caught his attention the most was that the eyes seemed just slightly bigger than usual.

Done with his business and inspection of the man, Kai simply continued onwards on his tiresome journey. Hoping that he could find someone that could help him - and not *the* someone that had killed his new clothes' previous owner.